Inside and outside

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INSIDE AND OUTSIDE

A Thesis

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College of Arts and Design
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Master of Fine Arts

in

The School of Art

by
Joshua Harry George
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I’d like to thank Coach Dave Pichon of the 14th Street Gym in Baton Rouge, LA. From the very 1st time I met him, he was excited about my goals, and he was very welcoming. I also want to express thanks to Gary Riley, Chris Pham, and Corey Dyer for reaching out to me as much as they have. These are young men that share a passion for boxing, and they’ve also supported me from my very 1st visit to the gym. I’d also like to thank Coach Tafari Beard from Sports Academy in Baton Rouge, LA as well as the boxers of that gym. A special thanks also goes out to Coach Jay and his three sons: John, Kendell, and Tate. I’d like to thank Nicole Cotton for all of her help and support along with the members of my thesis committee Denyce Celentano, John Malveto, Leslie Koptcho, Gerald Bower, and Ed Smith.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ....................................................................................................... ii

ABSTRACT .............................................................................................................................. iv

INSIDE AND OUTSIDE ............................................................................................................ 1

BIBLIOGRAPHY ..................................................................................................................... 14

VITA ......................................................................................................................................... 15
ABSTRACT

The boxing paintings and drawings are not about fighting as much as they are about the fighter’s existence. Many of the images show the boxer training or in an isolated environment in order to show how methodical their lives become. I see boxers as sacrificial athletes, not only because their health is at risk, but also because they must separate themselves from loved ones during training, as well as abstain from certain foods in order to maintain a certain weight. Every boxer is an underdog, in a sense. They are all at risk of losing something, whether it is their current fight, or their physical ability, which will decline with age. I don’t believe that a person can watch a boxing match without considering his own mortality. Each boxer, like every person, has his own limitations. The fighters in the gym are trying to strengthen what is weak, whether it’s their body, their skill-set, their strategy, etc. Every person, and fighter, has his own Achilles heel.
INSIDE AND OUTSIDE

I’ve titled my thesis “Inside and Outside” because this is a description of a boxer’s two options for fighting. A boxer fighting on the “inside” will try to get through his opponent’s reach and attack him closely. A boxer fighting from the outside will keep his distance from his opponent as much as he can, and try to keep him at bay with certain punches. This fighter doesn’t want his opponent to get “inside” of his range. The phrase inside and outside also makes reference to other aspects of boxing. Like every sport, there are aficionados of the sport, and there are casual fans, and then there are people who are only vaguely familiar with the sport. I’m making an attempt through this thesis to disclose some things about boxing that many people may not know. I also wanted to respond with my artwork to some previous works of art depicting the sport of boxing. Further, I wanted to capture a personal and private moment of the athletes I am painting. I wanted to not only display images of boxers boxing, but I also wanted to paint and display my work in a way that shows my gratitude to the boxers. I look at boxing as an art form, and if one pays attention you see individual styles that boxers possess, and moments where their movements are quite expressive.

I would like to explain why I’m interested in boxing as a subject matter to use for painting. I was always small growing up; I wasn't over 100 lbs. until I was 15 years old. At the same age I only stood about 5’2”. I was always interested in sports, mostly baseball and basketball, but I was never a stellar athlete. Growing up in a somewhat urban environment in Pensacola, FL, and attending a rather large High School, I was neither big enough, nor athletic enough to participate in high school sports. This is not uncommon for many young athletes that turn to boxing. In cities like Pensacola, FL, Mobile, AL, New Orleans, LA where there might be 2,000 students in a high school, many of the baseball, basketball, and football players tend to be
on the big and tall side. There were not many football or basketball players, even in high school, that are below 150 lbs. Yet even in professional boxing, a sport where the participants are mostly grown men, many are below 150 lbs. Of the 17 weight classes in professional boxing, 10 fall below 150 lbs. The weight classes drop in single digit increments to an unheard of 105 lbs. This is not the picture that the general public has for the majority of boxers. Most casual boxing fans are very familiar with the all-time great heavyweights like Muhammad Ali, George Foreman, Larry Holmes, Mike Tyson, and Evander Holyfield. These men held one of the most prestigious titles in all of sport; very few people have ever been called Heavyweight Champion of the World. The casual sports fan has always been more interested in the heavyweight division than any of the lighter divisions. Going back to the 1930's, there was international interest in the Heavyweight Division. After the performances by Jesse Owens in the 1936 Olympics, it was clear to most of the world that black athletes were not at all inferior to white athletes as people outside of the US had presumed. This same international interest turned to boxing in 1938 when Joe Louis fought Max Schmeling for the World Heavyweight title. This was a boxing match that attracted the interest of boxing fans of course, but also, this was a nationalistic event. The black American Joe Louis gained a following by many black Americans during the buildup of that fight. I believe that black Americans suffered worse than anyone during the depression years, and their beacon of hope shined in Joe Louis. Let’s remember this fight took place some 9 years before Jackie Robinson would integrate professional baseball. The Louis-Schmeling fight was broadcast by radio to millions of listeners throughout the world, with radio announcers reporting the fight in English, German, Spanish, and Portuguese.¹ I don't think there has been a fight of the magnitude of Joe Louis-Max Schmeling since their 1938 bout. I cannot answer definitively

¹ Webster’s Online Dictionary, Joe Louis, http://www.websters-dictionary-online.org/definitions/Joe%20Louis
why the heavyweight division has dominated popular interest for the last 80 years, but I believe much of the reason is due to the charisma, and controversy of Muhammad Ali and his impact on the sport as well as his political stances.

My own physical limitations in size drew my interest toward the smaller boxers. Even though I’m not a boxer, I felt a kinship toward these smaller athletes. These smaller boxers fight far below the radar of the mainstream media, and they are often ignored by the casual sports fan. Die hard boxing fans know the level of competition is staggering below 150 lbs. Warm up fights that take place before the main event will include these smaller fighters. Fans may shuffle into an arena while fights are taking place, still in the early evening. These fighters will fight for their paycheck, their own pride, their families, their countries, but most of the public is not concerned with a boxing match between two, 118 lb. combatants. This lack of interest is puzzling to me, as a boxing fan, because there are an overwhelming number of great fights in the smaller weight classes. The following will illustrate this statement:

Every year since 1922, The Ring magazine has given an award for "Fight of the Year." In 2006, the fight of the year was a bantamweight bout between Somsak Sithchatchawal of Thailand, and Mahyar Monshipour of France. This fight was a WBA bantamweight championship fight, yet it wasn’t televised at all in the United States. This is unlike “The Thrilla in Manila” or “Rumble in the Jungle (Zaire)” both of which Muhammad Ali participated in. Both of those fights were televised worldwide even before HBO, but many fights between smaller boxers go unnoticed, and are only talked about or televised in retrospect.

In the last 33 years, Ring magazine’s fight of the year award has been dominated by the weight classes below 150 lbs. Since 1980, only twice has a heavyweight bout been given the distinction of fight of the year: In 1992 Evander Holyfield vs. Riddick Bowe, and in 1996
Evander Holyfield vs. Mike Tyson. In the same span of time only once has a light-heavyweight (175 lbs.) bout been given the distinction, in 1980. The majority of the fights of the year for the last 33 years have been in divisions called Flyweight, Super-Flyweight, Bantamweight, Featherweight, Lightweight, and Welterweight. In the last 12 years all of the fights of the year have taken place at 147 lbs. or below, and 8 of those fights have been below 130 lbs. The reasons why such exciting fights are happening in unpopular weight classes are complex, debatable, but not altogether unexplainable. My point of stating this fact is quite simple however: Great boxing is happening among smaller athletes.

When I began visiting the Baton Rouge boxing gyms I found what I expected concerning the sizes of the athletes. The majority of the boxers I saw were not large people, but rather small. Coach Dave Pichon from Baton Rouge’s 14th Street Gym is a former bantamweight fighter (119 lbs.), and he stands at about 5’5”. Three brothers that are all members of the boxing gym Sports Academy range in weight from 120-140 lbs. Of the three professional boxers I’ve met, two fight below 150lbs, and the third is over 6’ tall and he fights at 154 lbs. The trainer I’ve come to know at Sports Academy, Tic, fought in the 140 and 147 lb. weight classes. Just as jockeys do, boxers must maintain their weight in order to be competitive. This kind of discipline causes the boxer’s bodies to stay lean. Their visible muscularity is merely a side effect of their necessity to remain in their chosen weight class. If the boxer has fat on his body, it’s keeping him in a weight class that may not be as desirable.

The weight classes are significant because they give the athlete the opportunity to compete to their strengths. Almost always, height and reach are the biggest advantages in boxing along with speed. But there is a height/weight ratio that has to be considered. A fighter

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2 Past Winners of the RING’s year-end awards, The RING magazine, (Blue Bell, PA: Sports and Entertainment Publications) February 2012
who is 6’ tall will most likely do poorly at 115 lbs., for instance. His frame would have less muscle than a shorter boxer, and his punches would most likely be less powerful/effective than a shorter fighter of the same weight. Even if this tall fighter had a speed and reach advantage, his lack of weight or strength would cause him to suffer from fatigue after the first few rounds. In the same token, let’s imagine a shorter man, say 5’8” and he weighs 200 lbs. This would be ideal in football, but in boxing, a 200 lb. fighter is a heavyweight, and those fighters usually stand 6’2” to 6’6”. Mike Tyson was considered small in the heavyweight division, and he stood at 5’11 ½”, right under 6’ and he was visibly smaller than most of his opponents. So there is a happy medium of weight and height that the boxer must evaluate for himself, in order to know best how to gauge his success in the ring. There are often fighters that do very well at one weight, say 140 lbs., but do horribly at 147 lbs. Their height to weight ratio would help them at the lower weight. Some fighters, like Thomas Hearns who stands 6’1” fought his first 33 fights as a welterweight (147 lbs.). Of those first 33 fights he won 30 by knock out. But in his 33rd fight he was KO’d in the 14th round by Sugar Ray Leonard, and Thomas Hearns never fought as a welterweight again. Getting down to the 147 lb. weight limit was too difficult for a man his size, so he and his coaches decided that moving up to the 154 lb. division was the best move for him. This background information regarding weight classes is important because my work focuses on the lower weight class boxers.

When I first approached boxing as a subject matter for painting, I was already a very big fan of boxing, and I’d been following the sport closely for almost to 20 years. I was also familiar with the work that George Bellows had done on the subject. Many people may not even know much about the sport of boxing, yet they might still be aware of Bellow’s work such as *Stag at Sharkeys*. That particular painting, while incredibly well-known and it indeed captures great
intensity, does not effectively show the sport of boxing. It does show a certain side of boxing’s (cultural) history, and it portrays the crowd and the atmosphere very well. For me, that is the strength of the painting. There are two quotes by Bellows\(^3\) that have helped me critique and respond to this work:

1) “I don’t know anything about boxing. I’m just painting two men trying to kill each other.” —George Bellows

2) "I am not interested in the morality of prize fighting. But let me say that the atmosphere \textit{around} the fighters is a lot more immoral than the fighters themselves." —George Bellows

![Figure 1: Stag at Sharkey's, G. Bellows, 1909](http://www.boxing.com/stag_at_sharkeys.html)

What we see is two men hardly clothed; they are aggressive and savage, and already injured and red. The crowd is excited, smoking cigars; they probably have money riding on the fight. The crowd is lively, and their styles are ambiguous, but I get the feeling that this is a middle class affair. The crowd is cramped and they are very close to the ring. Pushing and shoving is probably taking place on both sides of the ropes. There is so much information in the painting not related to the actual fighters. But what we don’t really see in his painting is the

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understanding of the boxer. Nor do we see the skill of the boxer or any hint of the boxer’s craft. We see a crude vision of Bellow’s idea of boxing.

My idea of the successful boxer is related more to the matador and his elusiveness than it is to the fighters in Bellows’ paintings. Bellows’ fighters appear to approach one another with reckless abandon. They look like they’re willing to scratch, bite, elbow, stomp, spit, or imagine a new way to inflict damage on one another. What I see in a successful boxer is the combination of aggression and control, explosiveness, and precision. These are some of the things that I witnessed when watching boxing. Calculation and planning were involved. Boxers and trainers exercised and developed theories and game-plans months in advance of a fight. I relate the boxer to the craftsman, who spends hours upon hours perfecting his craft. The boxer and trainer rehearse throwing combinations in innumerable sequences. The trainer will throw punches at his fighter in just as many sequences, so that his fighter will garner the response to any attack. Further, the boxer’s response is always meant to be a combination of punches; never is it desirable for a boxer to throw single punches.

Figure 2: Matador, J. George, 2012
In most of George Bellows boxing paintings, it’s not possible to discern the sizes of the combatants; the information is a bit too vague. One of his most famous paintings depicts an actual heavyweight fight between Dempsey and Firpo. In this painting one of the fighters is being knocked completely out of the ring.

![Figure 3: Dempsey and Firpo, G. Bellows, 1924](image)

Thomas Eakins is another artist whose work I felt it necessary to become familiar with. Eakins used the featherweight boxer Billy Smith as a model for two of his well-known paintings: *Salutat* and *Between Rounds*. Eakins was of course interested in the male form, but he also introduces the viewer (of his paintings) to a world that is devoid of women. Pugilism wasn’t recognized at this time to be a sport for acceptable gentlemen to be a part of; much less would it have been acceptable for any lady. Similar to drinking in bars until the era of prohibition; a respectable lady wasn’t in these places. It is often said that boxing is a sport for the lower class to be enjoyed by the middle class; this is something Eakins pays attention to, however it is subtle. His model Billy Smith in *Salutat* is very pale, but he has a slightly tan neck and face suggesting that he works out doors in some manner through the week. Boxers at this time
weren’t paid the way athletes are today; their participation would provide a supplementary income, thus the term “weekend warriors” would fit them perfectly.

In the time that Eakins painted these pieces, many boxers were immigrants or first generation Americans of Irish, Italian, and Jewish descent. There is a book by Allen Bodner titled *When Boxing was a Jewish Sport*, and it recalls the golden age of Jewish boxers from 1900-1945. The most famous of these boxers is Benny Leonard and Barney Ross, both of whom claimed World titles. Benny Leonard, who changed his name from Benjamin Leiner in order to fight against his parents’ wishes, is actually considered one of the greatest boxers of all time. He boasts a record of 90 wins against only 6 losses in a career from 1911-1931, and his alias in the ring was the Ghetto Wizard. He was past his prime when he made a comeback in 1931.4

Leonard was a victim in the Great Depression, and fought 21 bouts in 1931-1932 against mediocre opposition. He lost his very last fight by a TKO stoppage; the referee had seen the

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Once great Leonard take a merciless beating from an opponent that wouldn’t have stood a chance against Leonard 8 years earlier; the referee ordered the bout stopped as Leonard had no chance of winning. Such is the nature of boxing; one can never beat father time, and Leonard was fighting 15 lbs. heavier than he had in his championship years, when he was the lightweight title holder.

Benny Leonard was a native New Yorker, and his drawing power during his prime years is still impressive. For example, he defended his title against Lew Tendler in July, 1923 in front of 58,519 spectators. The gate for that fight reached nearly half a million dollars, to see two, 135 lb. men fight in the South Bronx.

At this time, while boxing was known as a sport for immigrants and Jews, it was not common at all for black fighters to fight against whites. For this reason, there are very few black champions before the 1940’s. But the social classes have developed in the last 70 years, and for a variety of reasons, Jewish fighters are not common at all here in the U.S. Nor are Irishmen. Now the most common boxers are black and Latin Americans. Many people will ask me why I’m only painting black boxers, but the truth is that the three gyms in Baton Rouge contain one white boxer. This young man, Gary, just recently moved to the D.C. area in order to train at a gym with elite fighters and amateur champions. He was the only white boxer that I knew of in Baton Rouge. I am painting boxers that I’ve come to know and it happens that these young men are all black. I don’t pretend to be a sociologist, but these are things that people discuss, and notice.

As much interest as I have in the historical boxing paintings by Eakins and Bellows, I have been influenced equally by Diego Velazquez. His portraits seem to capture his subject’s personality and psychology. He seems to be able to paint his subjects dignified yet vulnerable.

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and human. Velazquez’s portrait of his servant and understudy Juan de Pareja is such a portrait. I am not familiar with the fashion of 17th century Spain, but Pareja’s garments are common when compared to the subjects of Velazquez’s court paintings. Juan de Pareja is not a nobleman by birth nor does he hold a distinct position, but Velazquez seems not to notice those things. Juan de Pareja appears to be a very important and proud man, and this appearance is sincere, not something that is romanticized like David’s painting of Napoleon on his Arabian horse Marengo. Velazquez’s approach with his portraits was direct and not contrived; it seems that he appreciated the subjects of his paintings. This is also how I wanted to approach my paintings. I want to present Corey Dyer, a lightweight boxer out of the 14th street gym in Baton Rouge, with the same kind of appreciation that Velazquez shows Juan de Pareja.

![Image 1](image1.jpg)  ![Image 2](image2.jpg)

Figure 6: Corey Dyer, J. George, 2012  Figure 7: Juan de Pareja, D. Velazquez, 1650

The isolation of the boxer is also something my work focuses on. Like Degas’ work with the ballet dancers, I also wanted to show the isolation that the boxer endures. Even in the company of others, such as training in a gym, the boxer is in his own mind and waging his own battle. The boxer must have the will to push himself past previous thresholds in order to be
successful. In addition to physical pain and exhaustion, loneliness is another condition athletes must push themselves into. When former middleweight champion Marvelous Marvin Hagler entered his training camp before a fight, he called it going to prison.\textsuperscript{6} He felt that in order to train as successfully as he could, he needed to seclude himself; even his wife was on the list of “don’ts” while he was preparing for a fight. The psychological tension of isolation was something that I wanted to explore with the boxing paintings. There’s a saying that it takes two to tango, and this is true for boxing as well. But a common practice in boxing, right up to the moments before a fight, is shadow boxing. When a boxer is shadow boxing, he is throwing punches at an imaginary opponent. He not only throws punches but blocks punches and slips punches by moving around swiftly with his feet. In several of the paintings I wanted to show the individual boxer training, thinking, or simply considering his imaginary opponent.

I also magnified the space in some instances in order to magnify the solitude of the boxer. In addition, the area surrounding the figure (in Figure 8) is left rather vague in order to increase the idea of isolation; wherever this individual is in a geographical sense, he is off someplace by himself psychologically.

Some of the pieces show two combatants sparring or fighting, but most only show a single figure training. In either case, my overall feeling is that I didn’t show violence as much as I disclosed the sense of struggle. My passion for boxing is obvious, but I wanted these works to be more than just about boxing. I was already a fan of boxing before I met the subjects of these paintings, but then I became a fan of the people as I got to know them. I knew beforehand that boxers must be extremely dedicated to be successful, but then I was able to see the dedication of those specific people. For instance, none of the coaches I met makes his living as a full-time boxing coach. The coach at Sports Academy is a Baton Rouge police officer; the coach at the 14th Street Gym is a truck driver. These two men, along with other volunteers, have the same kind of commitment that their boxers have. That’s because the coaches were boxers themselves well into their twenties. There was a “passing of the torch” kind of feeling or relationship with the boxers and coaches. I think the paintings are positive and optimistic for the most part, and that’s not how boxing or any part of life really is. I haven’t shown any “losers” in these works. It’s almost as if the images have been filtered through the eyes of “Pollyanna”, but perhaps there is something cruel or dangerous looming, but unspoken. Every boxer, like every person, will experience some kind of loss.
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VITA

Joshua George was born in Chicago, Illinois, but was raised primarily in Pensacola, Florida. He developed an early interest in drawing by copying superheroes out of comic books. In high school he became involved in weight-lifting, and he developed an interest in exercise physiology while working at Wenzel Gym in 1995-1996. 1995 is also the year he first took any formal art classes. Joshua earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts in studio art from the University of Kansas in 2009, and he moved to Baton Rouge, Louisiana, the same year to begin the Master of Fine Arts program in painting at LSU.