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The Southern Predicament

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THE SOUTHERN PREDICAMENT

**A Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts**

In

The School of Art

**by
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B.A., Louisiana State University, 2000
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Abstract

The Southern Predicament is an exhibition that explores aspects of self-awareness and identity in the modern south.

The Southern Predicament

W.E.B. Du Bois's profound insight into the Black experience at the beginning of the twentieth century, *The Souls of Black Folk*, includes the term "double-consciousness" which he explains as a "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of the world that looks on in amused contempt and pity." The South's lamentable history of stubborn opposition to Civil Rights, the current majority's denial of equal rights to same-sex couples, and an unhealthy preference of religious ritual to reason (to begin a long list), have caused an unforeseen and ironic result: white folks in the modern South, regardless of their political or social positions, are forced to measure themselves with a similar "tape of the world that looks on", not necessarily "amused", but certainly with "contempt and pity." Dubois talks about three results of Sherman's march through Georgia: "the Conqueror, the Conquered, and the Negro." Consequently, at least two struggles continue to seethe at present: a struggle for the equal rights of people of color (which I am not qualified to talk about), and the struggle of white southerners to come to terms with their history and the negative stereotypes and generalizations that come with the inglorious title of "the Conquered."

In a conversation on the same topic, Peter Schjeldahl observed that a part of the southern identity is based upon a "loser mentality"—one dominated by the idea of having lost something that must somehow be won back. There exists within the same South a counterbalance of this mindset – one that tenaciously fights for civil liberties and racial equality, accepts constructive criticism, and strives for success. Unfortunately, the

South's shameful history has become an excuse to dismiss complete communities and entire Southern states as ignorant and backwards. (Consider the last culturally acceptable slur: "redneck.") While the problem with this paradigm is obvious, the reality is that it exists and it causes many southerners to grow up believing that their ability to achieve reasonable success has been compromised due to the geographic location of their birth. Generally speaking, with the exception of Faulkner and a few others, our only realistic choices are to stay and accept the mundane, the clichés, and the bias, or to leave altogether – to give up and get out. I consider these contrasting positions as dueling elements of the southern identity. The resulting conflict is the crux of my thesis work, what I call *The Southern Predicament*.

My work stems from the experiences I've gained growing up in the South. These experiences have been generally mundane, sometimes bizarre, occasionally fantastic, and on a few occasions, horribly detrimental. Now the memories of those experiences exist either like half-sunken ships that bob just below the surface of my consciousness and re-emerge every now and then, or as floatation devices of sorts, which I pursue doggedly. Only recently did I come to understand that my experiences, whether traumatic or fantastic, are assigned to categories and given priority by me alone. W.H. Auden said: "The so-called traumatic experience is not an accident, but the opportunity for which the child has been patiently waiting—had it not occurred, it would have found another—in order that its life become a serious matter." Before I heard this for the first time, I already knew what my traumatic experience was. Artistically speaking, I had been holding on to its deflated remains for some time and paddling in slow, self-conscious circles. I liked the idea of submerging it, thereby rearranging the rules of what worthy

subject matter is. Coincidentally this was about the same time I first heard of the Drive-By Truckers.

The band Drive-By Truckers makes music that could be the soundtrack to my paintings, or perhaps my paintings could be illustrations to their songs. They write and sing about a lot of the same ideas I make paintings about: the bias, the prejudice, and the conflict of southern identity (they call it the “Duality of the Southern Thing.”) One of the visiting artists to the L.S.U. made the comment that my generation does not read poetry, but we listen to music, which comes about as close to poetry as it is possible to get. This is not completely true, but it is so close that it is not worth arguing about. Music, like poetry, can be a huge influence; and the Truckers have greatly impacted the way I think about the South, and by extension, my own work. I will give some examples of their lyrics, the first of which comes from a song called “72 (this highway’s mean)” off the album *Southern Rock Opera*. Mike Cooley wrote it, and I think it gets right to the feeling of being inexplicably connected to the South.

Don't know why they even bother
putting this highway on the map.
Everybody that's ever been on it
knows exactly where they're at.
Hells on both ends of it.
No where's in between.
This highway's mean.
Seems like its always hot down here,
no matter when you come
It's the kind of heat that holds you
like a momma holds her son.
Tight when he tries to walk,
even tighter if he runs.
It's a mean old dusty highway
But it's the only one that'll get me there

The next bit is from one of Patterson Hood's songs titled "The Southern Thing", also from the album *Southern Rock Opera*. He sings about the southerners who did not agree with the reasons for the Civil War, but like the atypical Northerners who *did* believe in slavery, they fought for different, perhaps more complex convictions.

My great, great granddad
had a hole in his side
He used to tell the story
to the family Christmas night
Got shot at Shiloh,
thought he'd die alone
from a Yankee bullet,
less than thirty miles from home.
Ain't no plantations in my family tree.
Did NOT believe in slavery,
thought that all men should be free.
"But who are these soldiers
marching through my land?"
His bride could hear the cannons
and she worried about her man.

What separates the Truckers from other bands trying to do the same thing is that they succeed in criticizing the South when necessary without making fun of it, they accomplish sincerity without coming off as overly sensitive, and they deal effectively with conflict. Patterson Hood in particular has a way of distilling a large story down to a few descriptive lines that leave room for associations based on the listener's own set of experiences. The idea of leaving things open to interpretation has always been important to me, and I feel that leaving part of the story *out* of these paintings and drawings helps them refrain from simply illustrating an idea. I like the gray areas where nothing can be

completely pinned down or easily understood, and nothing is more complex than race relations except maybe religion.

So this work also emerges, at least partially, from the religious and spiritual beliefs that saturate the South. Samuel Johnson said, “It is wonderful that five thousand years have now elapsed since the creation of the world, and still it is undecided whether or not there has ever been an instance of the spirit of any person appearing after death. All argument is against it, but all belief is for it.” This may be doubly true in the South. I do not completely discount any religious teaching; neither do I seriously follow any. With that said, I have always enjoyed bible stories. I grew up attending the Church of Christ every Sunday and Wednesday where self-sacrificing church ladies would ensure that us kids learned the tales by heart. It is true that the story of Noah’s Ark was influential in my choice to make paintings about the low-lying Louisiana landscape, but I should also mention my belief that the story would be better illustrated by, say, Géricault’s *Raft of the Medusa* than with a rainbow arcing over a barge. Besides, the flood is more interesting than the boat. I think the flood is a fitting metaphor for the modern south. It is biblically and historically charged, and it can symbolize the end of something, the beginning, or both. I try to mutually communicate the duality of the flood, at once a beautiful reminder of nature’s command *as well as* a potentially devastating phenomenon, and the duality of the South: the place where some of the worst human rights abuses in American History took place *and* the birthplace of the Civil Rights Movement.

In exploring this idea, the thing I now refer to as The Southern Predicament, I recognized myself in both roles. I am physically linked to the historic oppressor and

ideologically linked with the oppressed. I cannot imagine a way of commenting on the subjects of race, politics, and religion without picking only one point of view, and thus one small piece of a much more intricate dilemma. The solution I came up with was to create a cast of characters, the inhabitants of a small, unnamed, southern town afflicted by frequent floods and burdened by its dark past. Each one is a sort of alter ego for myself. Now it is my characters that grow up, raise children, and confront the stereotypes, or, as antithetic versions of what I want to be, make the stereotypes possible. But no matter how high the water gets, the figures I paint and draw never stop trying to navigate their environment, and they continue to work with some manner of unity even as relationships become dangerously strained. Past betrayals lead to present paranoia, and the residents of my fictitious town understand that as well as anyone. They possess the uncanny ability to both selflessly give and selfishly take as the situation warrants. Though we, as viewers, are unsure of what exact circumstances collaborated to create the scene depicted and we are equally unsure of what will happen next, we may begin to relate emotionally; we may react to the despair or humor in a particular painting, or to the helpless feeling of finding one's self in an undesirable situation with no foreseeable solution.

My figures would recognize the desperation as well as the hope aboard Noah's ark near the end of its journey, they would read accounts of slave ships traveling across the Middle Passage and be enraged or indifferent, and they would vote in modern elections to grant or deprive the basic rights of others. They are a microcosm of the way I view our country at this point: divided, storm weary, and desperately seeking something worth trusting. Like my characters, it is the nature of human beings in general to be

contrary and volatile. I recognize good or bad traits in others because I have embodied both, and when I am honest, I admit that I still do. I do not make work designed to change culture for I do not believe it has ever been done, and I doubt it could be. I am exploring things that do not sit quite right with me. I am making paintings and drawings in order to deal with things I cannot comprehend in any other way. If they succeed, they will communicate that struggle to others.

Vita

Todd Hines was born in Painesville, Ohio, in 1971. He grew up in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. In 2000, he graduated from Louisiana State University with a major in studio art. For the next two years he made paintings independently and showed them regularly. In 2002 he began work on his Master of fine arts degree at Louisiana State University. In 2005 he presented his thesis exhibition entitled *The Southern Predicament*.