2004

True image

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TRUE IMAGE

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 if
Master of Fine Arts

in

The School of Art

by
Janet K. Link
B.A., Meredith College, 1989
May 2004
To Carl Dahle who
left paradise to follow me to Louisiana
and did everything
so that I could make this work.
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ABSTRACT

A still-life is often the painted record of a complex arrangement of objects. My aim in making the visual portion of TRUE IMAGE is to turn this sort of still-life inside out. Rather than arranging a collection of objects and making a painted or drawn image of the set up, I made simple images of things and arranged them with actual objects into three larger tableaux. The subjects of the paintings and drawings are these: checkerboards, objects, portraits, and shadows. The subjects of the tableaux are work (LABOR), home (DOMUS), and church (ECCLESIA). Viewed as a whole the exhibition asks questions about realism, artifice, illusion and perception.
1. DOMUS
mixed media
2004
2. ECCLESIA
mixed media
2004
3a. LABOR, center view
mixed media
2004

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mixed media
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2004
INTRODUCTION

I am interested in icons because they have a connection to the real world that other kinds of paintings do not. They are not realistically painted pictures that hang on the wall to be admired as art, although this is how some of them may have ended up. Icons are intended to interact with the universe in a concrete way. They are not just pictures of the sacred, but sacred themselves. An icon acts as a point of contact between a believer and a saint or a god. The icon of a saint is not to be confused with the actual person. It is not the real saint, but possesses a reality and a function of its own. The Virgin Nicopeia at S. Marco in Venice is believed to be a true image of the Madonna: an “authentic” portrait painted from life by Saint Luke. Veronica, whose name comes from Latin vera icona, meaning true image, wiped the sweat from Jesus’ face on his way to the cross. According to legend, an image of his face miraculously imprinted on the cloth and “is preserved as a holy relic.” These images are believed to have a special power and so a presence of their own because of a direct connection to the holy person represented.

In making this body of work I used the words TRUTH and IMAGE as an underlying structure upon which the exhibition is constructed. This paper is intended to supplement the visual images in the exhibition of paintings and drawings. I have used portions of Webster’s definitions of the words TRUTH and IMAGE to organize the paper:

**truth**: a transcendental fundamental or spiritual reality / the property of being in accord with fact or reality / *archaic*: fidelity

**image**: a reproduction of the form of a person or thing / a tangible or visible representation / the optical counterpart of an object produced by an optical device / a graphic representation

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4 Ibid., 571.
In this paper I will discuss these definitions as they relate to paintings in general, to this exhibition and to my studio practice.
TRUTH

On a test, students are asked to choose between two possible answers, “true” or “false.” In court a witness either tells the truth or perjures herself. People often think of the truth in terms of black and white, overlooking the gray areas. In the real world, though, things are rarely this simple. Two people can give very different descriptions of a single observed circumstance and there is rarely a single solution to a given problem. Facts and real things might seem to be explicit - but what facts, from whose point of view, and according to what criteria? If facts are a truth of things that can be documented or seen, then spiritual reality might be considered the truth of things unseen. This notion of truth is even less easy to pin down than factual truth, but a believer’s faith in his truth is no less real to him than the material version. Faithfulness is another aspect of truth with shifting interpretations. An action that constitutes betrayal according to one set of standards might seem like an insignificant deviation according to another. In the following section I will examine some varying aspects of truth, including the truth of material things, fidelity and the truth of a transcendental reality.

1. real things

I think of myself as being materialistic, but not in the sense that I want expensive things or evaluate the worth of my fellow citizens based on what they own. Rather I am emotionally attached to many of my material possessions. When I get a new favorite coffee cup I feel sorry for the old one. I am one of those people who find it hard to throw things away. I am the custodian of many objects that contain meaning for me. The burden of them increases every time I move my household. I think that this might have something to do with why I am drawn to still life painting in particular, and choose to make illusionistic pictures. It never occurred to me that there was any other way for me to work than in the language of realism. To many people, paintings that fall into the category of realism depict recognizable things. To them, the agenda of the artist is to reproduce on the canvas the material facts that fall within her gaze. This is particularly true in contemporary western society, which has always known the photographic image and sets it as the
standard of visual fact. In houses around the world one is likely to find at least one photograph album, they are the repositories of a family’s memories. The images must be documented on paper as though the mind cannot be trusted to retain this precious information. While on vacation people often seem to spend most of their time photographing each other instead of experiencing their surroundings. The mind no longer contains the memory, the picture does. But the photographic image is only one of several varieties of realism. The version of reality that a painter chooses depends upon his artistic agenda. He might want to mimic what he sees, and perhaps even in a way that fools the viewer into mistaking his painted image for reality. Another approach would be to paint not just what one sees, but how one sees it: one’s visual impression. Some versions of painted reality are not concerned with what the painter sees outside of his canvas at all, but rather with his perception of “real” subjects or the reality of painting materials aside from illusionism. These three versions of realism informed the making of the body of work in this exhibition.

When discussing realism in painting it is wise to define one’s terms. Realism is sometimes equated with realistic; a painting is put into the category of realism if its image is realistically painted. For the purposes of this paper I will call this notion of real, naturalism. Naturalism deals with the reality of physical appearances. Realism will be considered here as a way of thinking about painting, a style. How a painting is made depends upon the painter’s aims regarding realism.

The primary goal of naturalistic painting is to mimic what the artist observes. Since classical antiquity some painters have set as their goal the creation of a convincing illusion of reality. According to legend, the ancient Greek painters Zeuxis and Parrhasios challenged each other to a competition to see who could paint the most realistic picture. Zeuxis presumed he was the winner when birds tried to eat the grapes in his painting, but when he went to draw back the painted curtain on his rival’s picture and he discovered that Parrhasios had created the superior illusion. Zeuxis had tricked the birds, but Parrhasios had fooled Zeuxis! This legendary picture could be thought of as the first trompe l’oeil painting. Trompe l’oeil is a game in which the artist tries to blur the boundary between the painted and actual world to fool the viewer’s eye. This game generally lasts for only a short
time, and physical aspects of the painting eventually subvert its illusionistic aims. The edge of the picture is the biggest culprit, and painters have employed numerous devices to diminish the attention that edges call to the painting’s artifice. Shaping a panel like the object it depicts rather than a rectangle or adding a fictive curtain to a painted image are both ways to create ambiguity about the observer’s relationship to the painting. Brushstrokes are another traitor to the trompe l’oeil game and must be eliminated in order to keep up the illusion. Many painters have created convincing continuations of architectural space, but they require the observer to assume a single and unmoving point of view. To paint objects against a flat surface as William Harnett did creates a more flexible point of view. The painter has eliminated orthogonals that would spoil the game. Collectively these devices conspire to deny the painting and feign actuality.

The category of painting called trompe l’oeil is a favorite of mine. I enjoy the sport of it and aspire to the skill required to create its illusion. However, the ultimate goal of this exhibition is to ask questions rather than to make definitive statements. Toward this end I have adopted some methods of blurring the distinction between nature and art, but simultaneously have subverted them in order to call attention to the image’s artifice. All the subjects in the pictures are positioned against a flat checkerboard backdrop and the point of view is oriented in such a way that the squares are undistorted. As individual images they might be convincing but when grouped together into larger compositions the impossibility of the multiple perspectives causes the illusion to fall apart. In some areas of the painting I have used methods that minimize evidence of the brush but in other areas emphasized the brushstrokes in an effort to call attention to the images as painted. A picture frame, the Renaissance window, smooths the transition somewhat between the actual and the painted world but ultimately highlights the picture’s edge. Some of the pictures here have traditional frames and some have painted or drawn frames. In the panels without frames the checkerboard continues around the painting’s edge but the objects do not. To say that a painting is “in living color” is to imply a high degree of naturalism. Some of the images are drawn and others painted in grisaille, both of which can produce a remarkable picture in terms of light and form, but are not likely to be mistaken for reality even for a moment. One sure way destroy a painted illusion
is to display it in the company of actual objects, which I have done in an effort to invite comparison. A picture communicates a particular stance only in a specific context. I have placed these illusionistic pictures in a context that betrays their illusion in an attempt to establish their reality as pictures.

Some artists are not concerned with creating fictitious images but rather with recreating something realistic in terms of how and what they see. Claude Monet and Rembrandt van Rijn had different ways of making paint speak of light and air, but the work of both these men is quite obviously made from paint. Their paintings record not the material reality of objects but the optical reality of an atmosphere. Gustave Courbet's paintings are also made in a way that calls attention to the paint, but the realism in them is concerned with their subjects. He was the leader of the movement called Realism, spelled with a capital R, which rejected remote subjects in favor of those that can actually be experienced. Still another stylistic version of realism, New Realism rejects fictive subject matter altogether. New Realist painters were interested simply in the reality of the paint presented exactly as it is and wanted to avoid illusionism. These varied traditions of realism informed the making of this work although I have not taken a stand in any one of these stylistic camps. In most cases I refer to their stances by contradicting them. The pictures in this exhibition are not related to the way the human eye sees. Most of them contain irreconcilable problems of perspective with simultaneously broad and narrow points of view, and the quality of light is less than naturalistic. I have removed references to contemporary life in an effort to create ambiguity of time and location. Although the physical aspects of my materials are important to my work, they are not expressed in a large and obvious way. I am interested more in the small beauty of paint and charcoal that require intimacy to be perceived.

2. fidelity

To be true to someone or thing is to be faithful, bound to it "by a pledge, by duty, by a sense of what is

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6 Ibid., 463.
right or appropriate”7 Fidelity can be discussed in the context of this exhibition on several levels.

Faithfulness is a well-established theme in the tradition of western painting, where it often turns up in the form of a dog. “In most cultures the dog...stand[s] for loyalty [and] watchfulness.”8 The dog is a common symbol of marital fidelity and might be interpreted as such in the context of marriage portraits. The initial reason for including references to my dogs, in the tableau titled DOMUS (see fig. 1), is that they are my faithful children. Although one would never reasonably expect a dog to replace a child, they can be satisfactory surrogates where no children exist. In many ways a dog is far less troublesome than a child is. A dog will never wreck the car or require expensive college tuition and it can safely be left unattended in the yard with a bowl of water and an old shoe. The worst you can expect from Fido is that he might eat your art history paper. Granted, a dog is of little practical use when one is old and infirm, but it is utterly devoted in a way that a teenager almost never is.

Fidelity can also be considered in the context of the paintings and drawings and in the practice of making them. To call an electronic device, a stereo or television, high fidelity is to comment on the degree of accuracy with which it reproduces an original sound or picture. Making a faithful recording of a sound is not simply a matter of mechanics, but requires engineering and human judgement. When making a picture I strive to be faithful to my subject. I am interested not just in producing an accurate facsimile of the looks of my subject but to also in communicating something of its character. Accomplishing this aim does not require a photographic reproduction but rather a particular sort of attentiveness to the picture. I know that I am in trouble when I ignore the demands of an image. If I look with a steady eye and am not content with “good enough,” the picture will show me what it needs, and my obligation is to answer its requirements, so far as I am able. To think of a painter’s relationship to a painting in terms of fidelity implies a kind of reverence toward the image and indeed is accomplished through thoughtful meditation. The communication between painter and painting

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7 Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary, 426.
described above cannot be quantified and requires faith that such a dialog exists, in order to be practiced.

3. spiritual reality

There are some people who are faithful only to the truth that they can observe, and to them the mysteries of the world can only be articulated in the language of material facts. Our existence in this universe is not interpreted as miraculous but is explained rationally as the result of identifiable circumstances. Another category of people places its faith in a variety of versions of transcendental truth. For a believer, the order of the cosmos is satisfactorily explained as miraculous and divinely created. From this perspective corporeal life exists in the context of a spiritual reality. Our natural existence is only significant as it allows us access to a supernatural realm. Since the faithful, who exist in the material world, cannot substantiate the existence of a spiritual reality they construct descriptions of it. For the purposes of this thesis I will examine two means by which people give material form to their belief in an unseen reality: through their dreams and their religion.

Human beings have devised a variety of interpretations of the images that come to us in our sleep. Dreams might be prophetic, containing information from a divine source. They might also function psychologically to provide us with information about ourselves. Some psychological theories describe a multi-level symbolic system with which the subconscious illustrates to the conscious mind our superficial preoccupations, physical instincts and a larger essential truth. According to this theory, the shorthand of dream images is decipherable, and correct interpretation only requires analysis of the symbols and their context. Once someone told me that in order to figure out what a dream means, you should describe the objects in it, a lion for example, as if you are talking to someone who has no notion of what a lion is. By doing this you can understand what the lion means to your subconscious mind. Recently, a psychologist friend of mine supplied me with a simple explanation of dreams: he said that they are essentially an electrical storm in the brain and that the images are meaningless, except in the case of recurring dreams. According to this school of thought the images in a

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9 Ibid., 146-47.
recurring dream are significant, but of what the experts have no idea. To me, the last premise seems the most reasonable regarding the nature of dreams, but does not rob them of their magic. The world of dreams is wacky. In it we recognize people and things, but they often appear in nonsensical circumstances. In this sense the dream world is recognizable, but unknown. The checkerboard in these pictures functions in a similar way. A black and white tiled floor is familiar enough, but walls? I arranged the pictures in such a way that the checkerboards line up, and so collectively the images are like glimpses into an unknown but continuous world.

In my opinion, religious expression, in all its diverse forms, also provides people with little peeks into a hidden world. People use religion to describe, in human terms, what they find mysterious in the universe. We comfort ourselves by imposing a tangible order on the uncertainty of our chaotic surroundings. Since humans started painting images on the walls of caves we have been attempting to illustrate in concrete terms a truth than cannot be observed directly. Several connections can be traced from religion to this exhibition in particular and to my artistic practice in general. Catholicism is a vivid example of spiritual beliefs as practiced tactiley. From genuflecting to the taking of communion, the faithful use material means to express their version of spiritual Truth. In the tableau titled ECCLESIA (see fig. 2) I have used an aspect of Catholicism as an example of the physical representation of a spiritual concept. The instruments of Christ’s passion are the tools with which he was tortured. According to the Christian belief system, the faithful are saved only through the suffering that Christ endured on their behalf. By praying before images of these instruments a believer gains access to the spiritual world, not by contemplating an intangible sensation but by meditating on the physical objects used to inflict it.

Making art is a something like religious expression. Few artists are trying for mere technical accuracy in the images that they create. Part of the artistic motive is to impart a bit of something ineffable to the work. To some the essential goal of artistic creation is beauty, to some it is emotion, and to others it is a universal condition. Another parallel can be drawn between religion and the practice of painting and drawing from the point of view of god. In the beginning I am the god of the picture. I choose its subject, format and circumstance of light. Once I have
assembled the picture’s elements I can move them around in order to produce a composition that suits me. Eventually, however, our roles reverse. I become the servant of the picture, the god to which I am obliged to be faithful. In another religious analogy, one can find aspects of the painter’s life that seem monastic; we lock ourselves away in a cell to meditate on images in our pursuit of an expression of truth.

My intention is not to arrive at any one definitive truth in this exhibition. Neither the individual pictures nor the tableaux that contain them represent anything particularly real. These images are meant to cause one to consider the many layers of reality and the shifting nature of truth.
A cohesive definition of the word "image" is a little easier to secure than that of "truth." At its simplest an image is a picture. The precise nature of an image depends upon how it is produced. A camera uses light, lenses and film to fix a picture of a person or object onto paper, producing a photographic image. A man’s self-image is a mental picture of his understanding of himself and usually deviates from how others perceive him to be. Sometimes an image is intended to stand in as a graphic representation for something else entirely. An image may also be a tangible representation of someone or thing that one cannot actually see or feel, such as a god or a saint. This sort of image is sometimes considered to have a supernatural connection to the entity it depicts. Although these classifications of images can all be thought of as pictures, they differ in form and in their function for the observer. From the start, the notion of an image as a functioning object has informed the making of this work. In this section I will discuss symbolic representations, reproductions of form, and tangible representations as aspects of images that relate to the exhibition.

1. symbolic representation

In their paintings artists have been communicating in a language of symbols since prehistoric times. An image of a woman accompanied by a dog might not portray a narrative about a pet owner on a morning walk, especially if she also carries a key in one hand and a golden seal in the other. In this case she is probably the personification of Fidelity. The conventional language of symbolism is rich, with many sources available for deciphering it. Because there are so many objects that can be interpreted in so many ways, still-life painters run the risk of having their images mined for all sorts of symbolic representations. As an artist and student of art history I am drawn to iconography, and even when I do not have a particular meaning in mind for a given subject I often paint it in such a way as to imply a symbolic significance. I have made this group of paintings and drawings with special attention to what their subjects might be interpreted as representing, but my intent is not necessarily to use the language of symbols to say a particular thing. Painters cannot completely control how their pictures, when put on
public display, are viewed. No matter how many times Georgia O'Keefe said that her paintings depict flowers, critics continued to insist that she was mistaken. I could say what my subjects mean to me but I will not. The assignment of a discrete meaning to a picture is directly related to the person looking at it. An individual observer brings a unique frame of reference to a work of art from which he formulates his reading. In the context of my hesitance to impose a specific metaphorical meaning, I will discuss some elements that appear in the exhibition as illuminated by the existing vocabulary of symbolic language.

Color is a common vehicle used to make symbolic representations. Black currently has an almost inescapable association with the negative. In the west it can represent death, sorrow and a "renunciation of vanity," but in ancient Egypt it was the color of resurrection. Conversely, white is commonly associated with purity and virginity but in China is the typical color of mourning. The opposing nature of black and white draw them together, as in the yin-yang symbol, to represent the duality, the balance, and the interdependence of opposing forces upon each other. Blue and red can be similarly paired as opposites. Blue is the heavenly color of the Virgin’s robe. As the color of the sky, it can be called cool, ethereal, and less than solid. Red is associated with fire, revolution and vitality. Red is the color of blood and so can stand for the life force that circulates through every person or for the sacrifice of life. The liberal use of red in each of the tableaux could be understood as a reference to its symbolic connection to energy.

There are some objects in the images that are repeated enough that they invited a discussion of their symbolic history. An image of a disembodied wing occupies a central location in the tableau titled LABOR (see fig. 3). A wing represents a connection to the spiritual plane. In classical antiquity and Christianity, winged figures are messengers of god(s). Icarus’s wings symbolize the impetuousness of youth, and on Father Time, his fleeting

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11 Fontana, 67.
12 Tresidder, 226.
13 Ibid., 27.
14 Ibid., 169–69.
nature. In the context of nails, a hammer could refer to the Passion of Christ. Furthermore a hammer is the principal tool of Thor and Vulcan and is capable of destruction as well as construction. A hammer is a vigorous, forceful tool that the Soviet Union chose for their flag as an "image of productive work." Mirrors appear several times in two of the tableaux and function in various ways. In DOMUS I used mirrors to provide a shift in scale: this interrupts the large checkerboard with one of a smaller scale and makes it possible for a large hammer and a small brush to appear to be the same size. A mirror is a prerequisite when painting a self-portrait, but at some point the painter must decide whether or not to allude to the image as a reflection; to do so invites a comparison with the long history of mirrors in paintings. A mirror can be a disapproving symbol of vanity or a tool for self-examination. The reflected image is variously understood as truthful, an illusion, and containing part of a person’s spirit. When a soul arrives in the Shinto hell, a mirror reflects its sins to determine its form of punishment. For Alice, a looking glass is an opening into a parallel world. On the other side of the mirror she cannot expect the predictability of her familiar world. By including so many references to the mirror in this work I intended simply to imply significance rather than to state anything specific. It is the prerogative of the beholder to impose any of these or other interpretations of mirrors upon this work.

2. reproduction of form

A mirror, like a camera, is a mechanism that is sometimes looked to for the truth, but as I argued earlier such a device only produces a truth. The images created by an optical device are flattened out, in the case of a photograph frozen in a static moment. In a mirror the subject is reversed. Painting a self-portrait involves time spent scrutinizing oneself, peering into a mirror, activities that are responsible for the characteristic stern expression in many of these pictures. This way of working creates a figure that is at once observed and observing, when the picture is exhibited, this same figure

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15 Hall, 342.
16 Tresidder, 97.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid., 134.
that looked in before, projects out to its audience. By means of a portrait an artist projects something out of her painting. For instance she might wish to present something that she finds interesting or beautiful in the sitter. The sitter might impose his own agenda on the artist by requesting a projection of wealth, intelligence or virtue. Painters sometimes call a portrait a “head”; a portrait might depict a single figure and perhaps a group. In this paper I will also consider a thing called a cabinet, or Kunstкаммер, as a kind of portrait — a projection of its owner.

Rembrandt’s many self portraits reveal the psychology of a man over the course of his lifetime. According to Joseph Koerner, Albrecht Dürer, in his self-portrait of 1500, “mythicises the identity between image and maker, product and producer, art and artist, announcing that it is in art that human labor achieves its ideal.”¹⁹ I cannot say that my agenda is this lofty, or that I have come within a mile of this stunning image, but the inference of a self-portrait as object and spectator inspired the making of the painted portion of DOMUS. These same two pictures are also in the tradition of marriage and occupational portraits. When considered as the whole this tableau might be understood as a family portrait. In LABOR the set-up repeats reflected images several times in an attempt to call the subject into question. By making adjustments to the common portrait image, I hope to project uncertainty about their functions and leave interpretation open for debate.

The cabinet emerged in the sixteenth century as a small room, usually adjacent to the bedroom of the master of the house. It had a variety of functions: it was used for study, to house a collection of precious objects, or to receive important guests. The early cabinet was for private use, and not a public room. These small dark rooms usually looked out to the garden in order to provide them with light. During the seventeenth century the word cabinet was used to describe not just the room but the collection that it housed. Each collection usually included works of art, scientific instruments, natural history specimens, curiosities and sometimes a specially designed cabinet for display. The objects were arranged aesthetically and not according to any cataloging system, and the rooms were

often highly decorated. The focus of the collection was meant to reflect the interests of the collector, and so they had “symbolic meaning connected to the patron’s social position and intellectual ambitions.”

The cabinet might be considered a sort of portrait of its owner. In fact, in the seventeenth century, a genre of painting emerged with cabinet collections as their subject. These paintings were composed according to several formulas: sometimes as a kind of “encyclopedic still-life” meant to show a cross section of the collection, and now and then including a portrait of the collector and other scholars. In the mid seventeenth-century, artists began to paint self-portraits surrounded by a Kunstkammer, not just as a way to present themselves as makers of art but as connoisseurs in their own right, thereby asserting their social and intellectual status. In the eighteenth century the private cabinets diminished and were replaced by public museums.

The collection owned by a museum projects a particular image, but of an association, whereas the Kunstkammer creates a portrait of a specific person. At the beginning of this paper I wrote about my ever-increasing accumulation of things. In a way, my house and studio could be considered a kind of cabinet where I arrange my collection. As such it can provide an observer with an image of the person who lives and works in it. It is like a portrait. In the tableau LABOR I present some of the objects from my collection. In this composition I compiled objects and images of objects to show a little cross section of the material of my life, and so it functions like a cabinet picture. It is an image of my cabinet, and by implication, of me.

3. visible representation

From the viewpoint of twenty-first-century America, paintings have little function other than an aesthetic one. If a portrait or still-life smells of a didactic purpose it is often quickly dismissed as illegitimate. A religious icon painted by a contemporary master would likely be either evaluated for its formal quality or not taken into

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22 Ibid.
critical consideration at all. In many places painted icons have been removed from daily life and hung in museums as a kind of curiosity from a remote time, and they are certainly far removed from their original capacity as practical tools. Most of my attraction to these images stems from their role as useful objects, even though I am not convinced that their supposed power is real. The work in this exhibition was not made in an attempt to physically access the spiritual plane as religious icons purport to do, but with an aim toward producing iconic images rather than narrative ones.

Although there are variations within the genre of paintings called icons, one can devise a general description of such an image that would be familiar enough: a simple picture of a figure, often positioned frontally. A particular saint’s icon would present the figure dressed in the required manner and color and accompanied by its appropriate attributes. During the Middle Ages the images were typically life sized. In order to be considered sacred, an icon must conform to a strict set of criteria. When the Patriarch of the Eastern Church went to Florence in 1438 he said, "'I can pray to none of the saints depicted [in the Latin Church] because I recognize none of them. Although I do recognize Christ, I cannot even pray to him because I do not recognize the manner in which he is depicted.'" An icon does not function as an aid to prayer in the same way that an image of the instruments of Christ’s Passion would. The faithful pray to a sacred image rather than with it. To a believer an icon is a serious object - some could only be accessed on certain days - whose holy character is enhanced by the formal arrangement of its composition.

In making this body of work I devised for myself a simple formula to go by, a kind of canon like an icon painter would use. Each image contains the following elements: at least one object, an object or a shadow that intrudes from the edge, and a checkerboard backdrop composed of twelve-inch squares. The images are life-sized, with the exception of reflections, which are themselves life sized even though the objects in them are not. The still life set-ups are kept simple and so lend themselves to an iconic reading rather than a narrative one. By hanging the objects on the wall they are posed frontally,

23 Belting, 1.
24 Ibid., 13.
and their images imply a spiritual presence. The checkerboard intensifies this effect by pushing the object further forward than a solid backdrop would. If an icon is to retain its intended use as a tool, it must engage with the world beyond the borders of its image. Although the individual pictures in each of the three tableaux can function independently, I have arranged them so that they come together in a common composition. By doing this I have given the drawings and paintings roles to perform that extend beyond their edges: to serve the larger whole. The arrangements of the tableaux, although more complex than those in the pictures, are still presented in a rigid and frontal manner so that they likewise can be understood as iconic rather than narrative.
CONCLUSION

When I began making this work in August of last year, I took my inspiration from my understanding of icons. I saw these paintings as words or signs that stand in for an idea. According to my plan, I would make small pictures that each have a particular meaning and then arrange them with objects into a larger installation, to form a sort of sentence. The paintings, drawings and objects would be like modular units that one could rearrange to form different thoughts. I had an image in my mind of what the gallery would look like. With all the work installed into its discrete sentences they would come together into a cohesive whole, a paragraph that makes a larger statement. When looking at the completed exhibition one would be able to tease out a meaning by deciphering the components.

From my vantage point at the end of this process I can see that ultimately the form of the image is not far from my original vision, but my impression of its meaning is a world away. As I made the pictures their meanings changed. When others told me their thoughts about the work its meanings changed. The result of having written this paper is that the meanings of the images have changed, as they also will after I defend this work and again when I look back on it in another year. The difference from then to now is that I am no longer the active creator but a passive beholder. Like any other viewer, I bring to an image the sum total of my existence. I use the information available to me to decode its message, and as soon as I get a new codebook (or add to the existing one) I understand the message differently. The images have not changed, but I have.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


VITA

Janet Link was born in Ames, Iowa, in 1962 and reared in Raleigh, North Carolina. Her father David was an engineer and musician, and her mother Margaret is a librarian and seamstress. In 1988 she went to Paris to study painting with Ben Long and the following year received a Bachelor of Arts in painting from Meredith College in Raleigh. She worked as a painter and teacher from 1989 until 2001 when she began graduate studies at Louisiana State University. She will receive a Master of Fine Arts in painting and drawing in May of 2004. She lives in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, with her husband, Carl Dahle, and two good dogs, Gumbo and Brunswick.