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## Facing Reality

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# FACING REALITY

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 Art

in

The School of Art

by  
Mitchell Patrick Hobbs  
BFA, Centre College, 2009  
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## Abstract

*Facing Reality* is a show of landscape paintings and drawings of Baton Rouge, executed mostly through direct observation. Working this way has allowed me to slow down and specifically engage my surroundings and the physical locations that are compelling to me. I am interested in being open to the possibilities provided by experience, and using what I find to create meaningful, honest, and visually poetic pictures.

## Introduction

I stood in the driveway for the first time in almost three months. There stood the ugliest seven story concrete parking garage ever. It was right on top of what used to be a beautiful view. I couldn't see the trees anymore or even the big yellow-bricked dormitory. I was dwarfed by human progress—a parking garage. It felt funny to be nostalgic for a place in transition, that was never meant to last.

The title for my thesis is a play on words. I am interested in painting from direct observation. Some people might call this painting from nature. I like the word reality instead because it emphasizes my experience working on site as opposed to the natural landscape. Whereas nature is associated with the natural features of a place like fields, mountains, or rivers, the word reality highlights the relationship of people with the landscape or harkens to the fact that the places I paint are occupied by a human presence. I am interested in painting as a vehicle I can use to develop a genuine relationship with my environment, and in this particular series of paintings and drawings that is done by working on site. This can provide a variety of challenges like dramatic changes in the physical space, difficult weather conditions, or limitations with what can be brought to a site. Creating something meaningful is always a challenge regardless of where or how it is made, but if I'm going to have a difficult time I figure I might as well go outside and look at some interesting parts of the city and perhaps meet some people too. Kurt Vonnegut once wrote, "Electronic communities build nothing. You wind up with nothing. We are dancing animals. How beautiful it is to get up and go out and do something." (Vonnegut, 61) When I go out and "dance" I end up with drawings, paintings, and a rich heap of memories.

*Facing Reality* also refers to my choice of subject matter and the way I paint it. I have an appetite for forgotten or discarded places. The places I paint often stand out to me because they look roughed up or lived-in, or they are in a state of transition as with the construction site

drawings and paintings. I would like my paintings to draw attention to the kinds of places where people have forgotten to look, serving as permanent views of what would have been an otherwise temporary glance.

My drawings and paintings are often painted in what could most easily be labeled a realist style. I think paying attention and trying to get at the color and look of what I am really seeing is as expressive and interesting as anything someone could invent or remember. After all, everything outside is changing all the time. Light, temperature, humidity, and especially human activity throw the look of things into flux and if you are trying to pay attention to all the detailed subtlety of experience you can have a tough time deciding what color, value, or mark needs to be used. There is wealth of information and visual poetry happening all the time, so much so that all one need do is slow down and pay attention to what is before them, rather than imposing preconceptions or rules about what to do and paint.

The other meaning behind the title is in relationship to how I composed most of the images. I remember noticing that all of my paintings and drawings had a centrally located or nearly centrally located element. I would put a water tower right in the middle of the page or paint the skeleton of an apartment being constructed very near the center of the painting. At first this bothered me, because I thought maybe I was making pictures with an unimaginative sense of compositional arrangement. Instead I have realized, as time passed, that I was looking very hard to find some type of meaning or to understand what I was experiencing and witnessing. I am reminded of the famous Nietzsche quote, "And when you look into the abyss, the abyss also looks into you." I was squaring up and trying to directly face these places and they were in turn addressing me.

## From Person to Place

I stepped aside from the large ink drawing to sketch the man with the red bandana digging in his dusty hatchback for a cooler while his friend sat under a tree on his cellphone. The man with the bandana looked over and saw me drawing him. He smiled and waved. I laughed and approached holding out my sketchbook to reveal the haphazard drawing. He nodded in approval and touched his index finger down on the white Conte crayon of the workman boots his friend wore in the drawing. He laughed and pointed to his friend calling him, “Botas Blancas!”

His friend looked up from his phone in disapproval of his new nickname.

“I’m Mitch,” I said extending my hand.

“Carla.” We shook hands and he offered me a Pepsi out of his cooler along with a giant pickle from the nearby gas station.

“Thanks!”

I chatted with Carla between bites of pickle and swigs of Pepsi, and he and the other construction workers talked about driving in from New Orleans every morning to be at the site at 7AM. When lunch was over they packed away their coolers, locked up the car, and walked back past the fencing to a pit sprouting white PVC pipe. I returned to the larger ink drawing. It had dried. I picked up a charcoal pencil and squinted my eyes at the apartment complex behind the crane.

Before painting and drawing landscapes on site I made figurative drawings and paintings, mostly portraits that were heavily influenced by Lucian Freud. The first painting that grabbed me by my shoulders and demanded all of my attention was Freud’s *Head of the big man*. I wasn’t looking at a painted portrait, but instead I was experiencing the actual man in the flesh. For me, Freud has always been able to deliver the most intense visual experience, as if I am in the room with him and the sitter. The incredible focus and attention to *everything* paired with the physicality of the impasto paint surface, delivered by hogs-hair brushes and palette knife creates human presence—the penultimate goal of portraiture. Beyond that, the meticulously detailed



realism of a Freud portrait capitalizes on the power of painting, as Robert Hughes once noted, “Painting is, one might say, exactly what mass visual media are not: a way of specific engagement, not of general seduction.” (Hughes, 8)

When I started graduate school, I took all of these lessons to heart and was making mostly small, detailed portraits of people I knew on copper plates. Eventually, I began working at a larger scale with charcoal and pastel on watercolor paper, and even tried reaching out to people in the community as sitting subjects rather than working with classmates exclusively. Regardless of the changes I was making in my medium or subjects I had ongoing difficulties that led me to move away from portraiture and the figure in favor of the landscape.

The most consistent obstacle with the portraits was finding a reliable model. Few people had the time in their schedules to sit, and often the people who were willing to sit were unable to with any consistency. I had to work from photographs and life sessions when I could get them. Lots of artists have used photograph to create paintings. Even Antonio Lopez Garcia, a master of contemporary realism and dedicated perceptual painter used photography to complete his painting of the Spanish Royal family. But for me painting from the photograph did not provide me with an experience. A photograph was such a thin sliver of a moment, and so working from them felt false. I wanted to be able to see the person and respond to their presence. The photograph was not enough and I was relying on them more and more throughout my second year of graduate school.

It was at this point that I went out and began a drawing of the LSU Tiger Stadium construction. The football stadium had been undergoing a large scale renovation for nearly a year, and it was a breathtaking spectacle. Three giant cranes were delivering cement mixers to

construction workers who were strapped and hanging from giant yellow casts for pillars. I started that initial drawing with ink and a brush knowing my indecisive and obsessive tendencies wouldn't hinder my response to the ephemeral qualities of the landscape. I was working right beside one of the ROTC buildings on campus and I remember those young men and women stopping by to ask me about what I was drawing and talking about the construction. I realized I was performing for passersby and I enjoyed the occasional distraction of conversation. It provided a natural break from drawing and I always felt encouraged to continue working.

At the same time I had formed a habit of driving through downtown or along the Mississippi River at night. This led to an interest in the stadium construction at night, and I ended up doing a 5x3ft. ink and charcoal drawing from the bed of my pickup truck. Again, I was met with encouragement and interest, but this time it came from construction workers. They would see me in the empty parking lot and come up to check the progress of the drawing. These interactions gave me a sense of purpose and connection to the places I was working. I slowly started painting more outside from that point on, especially at night.

## Subject Matter

“Hey man! Where’ve you been?”

I was standing straddle-legged with each foot resting on the seat of two plastic chairs, my back to the construction site and my head twisted around squinting at the bed of gravel and lone iconic structure of pink and yellow studs and tyvek—skinless guts of a soon-to-be apartment building. I looked down and swiveled my hips to face the approaching building surveyor. I couldn’t remember his name. He was tall and thin with a full mustache and sunglasses. I had talked with him a number of times and never seen his eyes. He liked to tell me about his son who draws a lot.

“Hey! Yeah, the weather wasn’t so good last week, so I tried working on some other things.”

“Oh. Yeah, it rained a bit there a few days. Man, you’re really getting it now.”

“Thanks.”

“How long do you think you’ll take? They’re going to start setting those concrete pillars and building the parking garage real soon. It’s going to look real different.”

“I’d like to be finished at the end of November, but I don’t know. I don’t know. I just don’t know how I’ll finish. I just got to keep showing up.”

“Well, it changes all the time.”

“I know. I’m trying to figure out what works for the painting. I don’t know.” The sun was wearing me out and my pants and shirt were soggy with sweat.

I didn’t set out to make paintings about the encroachment of human development on nature, or nature’s ability to adapt to the ever-growing city. Instead I find our “development” or “progress” and its effect on the natural world to be a fact of life. Our relationship to the land is interesting, and people build and perform all sorts of altercations to the landscape all the time. When I was asked once why I was painting construction sites I replied that the place was interesting looking. There was a giant bright yellow crane, piles of gavel and dirt, pink colored

wood studs like bones of a building, and mint green Bobcats. The look of a building when it is under construction with all its guts exposed, surrounded by the mess progress is infinitely more exciting to me than the final state when the structure is just another concrete box like all the rest.

When I started drawing and sketching around the apartment construction adjacent to Aster St. I had no idea what I was going to end up making. The first drawing from that series, *Rained Out* (see Appendix, A1), is titled after exactly what happened. I was drawing a porta-pot and the entrance into the construction when a heavy rain forced me to pack up. I tried working from memory in my studio, but was frustrated by the experience and wanted to try again. The crane had been especially interesting to me initially, but it moved so frequently. This led to me using a lighter ink wash to begin the second drawing, *“That’s a diesel powered pile driver.”* (see Appendix, A2) After I had spent a couple days on that drawing I began sketching around the site looking for ideas to make a painting. From those sketches I found my view standing atop a chair in someone’s driveway. I enjoyed scanning across the construction site along with the one-point perspective leading to the centrally located building resting like a temple from an old set of ruins. A lot of the places I paint allow me room to imagine narratives and stories.

*Where a house used to be...* (see Appendix, A3) is another multi-media drawing like the construction site drawings, this one however was a of fenced off lot with a concrete foundation, old dog kennel, and the kind of plastic chair you would likely find in a 1<sup>st</sup> grade classroom. That drawing began by chance as I decided I would walk through that neighborhood until I found something. The first thing that struck me was the child-sized chair sitting off to the side of the barren foundation. The longer I stood looking the more full the site became. It wasn’t empty at all, and the discarded and fenced off feel of the place made it stand out rather than conceal it.

One day a semi-truck was parked directly in front of my view of the lot. I decided to begin a new drawing inside the corner of the lot looking back across it, and so that is how I began *Father-In-Law's Lot* (see Appendix, A4). I was busy drawing that day when a man came into the lot and began cutting what little grass was still there and chopping down a dense patch of weeds. We exchanged hellos and I asked the man if the place belonged to him and if I needed to leave. He said everything was fine and that I could keep drawing. He had watched me some when I was working across the street on the sidewalk. He told me the lot used to be his father-in-law's house, and that his wife made him come out from time to time to clean-up. I didn't ask any more questions so as not to be intrusive or rude.

So much of the subject matter I choose to paint and draw starts out as a series of questions or imagined stories, and I hope to learn more about the place as I return and continue working. The haze of light pollution that fades into the deep dark night sky; the triangular patch of reflected sunlight on the corner of a building; a bouquet of weeds and yellow flowers under an expressway; an abandoned dog kennel baking in the August sun atop a concrete foundation where a house used to sit; a water tower rising up from the horizon, underlit and glowing like a science fiction spaceship; there is a lot that gets lost in our manic shuffle. Our visual experience, when we slow down and consider it isn't so much our own, but rather some kind of manipulated, half-known, hardly understood, and quickly forgotten façade. It is so easy to look at a water tower and not consider it. To think, "I know what that is," without actually understanding how it works, or paying attention to how weird it looks. A water tower is strange. When I think of water my mind throws up the word life-force. We have to have water to exist. And there it is—stored in a giant metal vat on stilts. Weird. I get to experience trains of thought like this when I am out painting and drawing the landscape. These ideas that fester in my head when I'm out making

paintings develop my personal relationship to the world, and get me closer to a visual experience that is my own.

## Working Perceptually and Seeing My View

I handed the police officer my driver's license and LSU ID. The other officer who had been shining a Maglite through my pickup truck walked over to me.

"You know this is a place where people deal drugs and get shot?"

"Yeah."

"Oh, you know that?"

"Uh, I know it's not safe. It can be dangerous. I've been coming out here since August. Most of the time I bring a friend to keep an eye out."

There was a look in the officer's eyes that seemed to communicate he thought I was an idiot. I couldn't blame him if he felt that way either. Honestly, who draws pictures in the middle of the night by some train tracks wearing a headlamp?

One of the debates I have heard consistently while in graduate school is whether an artist should or should not use a photograph to create a picture. I personally have a problem with absolutist statements of that sort, and the first rule of art is there are no rules. I choose to paint and draw from direct observation because I enjoy being open to the possibilities that experience offers me. I relish in the challenge of working from perception. As David Hockney once said, "A two dimensional surface can easily be copied in two dimensions. It's three dimensions that are hard to get onto two. That involves making a lot of decisions." (Gayford, 11) It is the personal interpretation of the three dimensions onto the flat surface of the picture that I find both challenging and exciting. There is a satisfaction in having communicated my visual experience through painting or my view of reality as an accumulation of visual and personal experiences of place. I'm not interested in seeing the world through a lens all the time. I have to deal with that enough when I am trapped in front of a computer or television screen. When I am out in the open

I am really seeing and feeling, and the decisions I make about what goes into the picture are influenced by myself, the world I'm standing in, and the needs of the picture I am making.

Another particular aspect of working perceptually that is important to me is my eye zooming in and out of space. The human eye is mobile. When I was first learning to draw and paint from observation there was a lot of instruction around seeing the "forest before the trees" or the "whole before all the individual parts." This is a good idea, because nothing is more frustrating than painting in a detail like an eye only to realize it is in the wrong place. However, when you think about it no one sees an entire scene or space all at once like a picture. People see bits and pieces at a time. Our eyes are delivering a dense and rich visual experience, and I hope that by making paintings directly from that visual experience I can create pictures that are honest and filled with vitality.



## Format and Composition

“Is that a door you’re painting on?”

“Yup.”

The truck driver chuckled. “Interesting. I still don’t see my truck in there yet!”

We laughed and Texas pulled up alongside us in a pick-up truck. He and the truck driver spoke about some part of the construction that was getting ready to get underway. “What up, Mitch?”

“Hey, Texas!”

“It’s looking good. How much longer you gonna work on it?”

“Not sure anymore. Soon I hope. I’m moving so slow!”

“Well, it takes time. No way to rush something like that.”

The format of my drawings and paintings has evolved to fit the landscapes I’m working in. I began by drawing on 24 x 36 in. pieces of drawing paper. The long rectangular format made sense as a standard starting point for landscape.

When I would sketch out ideas for larger paintings I would think more carefully about the type of format I was interested in using to try to describe the visual experience I was having in the place. For example, in *Construction Site Painting: View from a Driveway* (see Appendix, A5), I knew I wanted a panoramic or longer rectangle to give a sense of how the construction site stretched across the horizon and filled my line of sight. When I looked out from the driveway I was standing in I would turn my head slightly to the left and right and scan across the top of the black fencing, so I chose to use a wide enough panel that would encourage the viewer to turn or swivel their view across the picture plane as well.

Similarly, with *Long Night (Past Those Tracks)* (see Appendix, A6), I tried to work at a large scale in a format that would help give the viewer a sense of the experience of being under

the heavy night sky. I also liked the presence of the black power line right above my head, and working in a tall rectangle would allow me to include that in the painting.

*Long Night (Past Those Tracks)* is different from the other two large scale paintings in that it is comprised of three separate panels. I started the painting on site with the central panel and decided that I wanted to include more of the sky and create a foreground as well. This led to the creation of the top and bottom panels which I continued to transport to the site to paint on at night. Working on that painting at night became frustrating. I couldn't get a sense of how the picture was developing as a whole, and how the three sections related to one another. The painting was too big and I couldn't produce enough light, so I ended up revisiting the site to create an oil sketch, multi-media drawing, and a more analytical pencil drawing along with a number of smaller sketches which I used to finish the large painting in the studio.

Compositionally, the pictures evolved organically much like they did in regards to format. *The Old Basketball Court (A Good Place to Drink Beer)* (see Appendix, A7) developed in relation to the two smaller oil paintings, *Off-Ramp Bouquet* (see Appendix, A8) and *Expressway Painting (Oliver's Hangout)* (see Appendix, A9). I began painting underneath expressways at a small scale because it seemed like a simple solution to getting out to paint when it was threatening to rain. I was also aware of some paintings by Rackstraw Downes and George Bellows that were executed underneath bridges, and the underside of an expressway with all its weight at the top of the composition seemed interesting. What ended up catching my attention was how the concrete pillars framed separate little windows within the picture. Being underneath a structure like an expressway also provides me with a dynamic space to compose. For example, *The Old Basketball Court (A Good Place to Drink Beer)* is a foreshortened "U" spatially, with the viewer standing at the bend of the "U."

As mentioned before, just about every drawing and painting in the exhibit features a centrally located element within the picture. I think these elements in the middle of the pictures end up having a presence that emphasizes the theme of squaring up and facing the real. These centrally located subjects, be it a tree, water tower, half-finished structure, weeds, or empty lot are pictorially important or significant by being placed where they are on the picture plane. This helps solidify or make permanent a view that otherwise would have likely been a temporary glance. I hope that the paintings and drawings can become places of meditation and contemplation.

## Detail

“Man, that’s detail to the max,” said Richard. His brow was pulled up and his eyes were wide.

“Thanks. The detail is just what comes from paying attention, and I hope if I pay attention to fill the image it will get the attention of the person seeing the painting. That they will notice a place they wouldn’t have before.”

“They’ll see it,” said Kenny. “You’re going to get some people’s attention.”

I hoped Kenny was right.

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“Man, it looks like a photograph,” said Texas. “I mean all the detail in those trees especially.”

“Thanks.” I hoped like hell my painting didn’t look like just another photograph.

I use a lot of detail and intricate brushwork and mark-making throughout this body of landscapes. I think this type of description emphasizes my obsessive and focused observation of the places I paint, but I think the detail in these pictures is working in a couple of different ways.

In a practical sense the details are how I am able to best understand what I am seeing as I look and move across the picture plane in response. For example, the trees and buildings in the lower left of *The Old Basketball Court (A Good Place to Drink Beer)* were needed to help me move through that section of the painting and to describe the space behind the brick red school building. A light green touch of paint with a larger brush would not have helped me make sense of the subtle shifts in temperature and value of green that signified trees at various distances from where I stood.

Cindy Tower is a contemporary painter who makes use of detail to emphasize the decay of the abandoned industrial complexes she paints. The detail of her paintings becomes a

commentary on the garbage humans create and leave behind. In my opinion, her decrepit factory interiors are similar to the grotesque human decay seen in the figurative paintings of Ivan Albright. In a similar way, the level of detail in my paintings in relation to the subject matter itself. Giving so much attention to a dumpster, or trying to focus on the actual number of individual studs that make up a building fills those elements of the painting with meaning. For me the detail helps emphasize the continuous attention and devotion I give to the location while also helping me bring as full an experience to the viewer as possible. If the viewer feels a sense of the place from the landscape then the detail is working.

## Influences

I was standing on the top floor of the parking garage looking East across the dull haze of light pollution that faded into a hot purple and black sky, remembering a painting by Oskar Kokoschka. I tilted back and squinted at the city and then my painting before wiggling the brush in response to all the little leaves and branches of a nearby tree. I pretended I was Kokoschka for a moment and tried to feel serious about my painting. Distant cars glided across the expressway and I remembered that nothing had stopped moving. The world doesn't stop and I was there to pay attention to it and respond honestly. I didn't have to pretend to be any other artist. I just needed their help.

There have been a number of painters who have inspired me as I have developed. The paintings George Bellows made of New York City around 1908 and 1909 were particularly encouraging for their frank descriptions of the common person's experience of the city. Bellows painted New York City when so much of the place was under construction, torn down, or dug up. In doing so he captured the excitement of that time and feel of the city with a confident, muscular, and direct painting style that made me want to go out and find my subject matter in Baton Rouge.

Rackstraw Downes has been influential for his dynamic spaces and unflinching detail. So often his paintings are noted for their use of the panorama as format, and this creates a number of reads. However, I find the landscapes of Rackstraw Downes interesting for their creative inclusion of elliptical passages along and spatially through the canvases. In "Young Trees Round An Elliptical Lawn, Liberty State Park (George W. Bush, Charles Schumer, Hilary Rodham Clinton, and George Pataki Depart Ellis Island In A Formation Of Choppers, July 10, 2001)" Downes uses the elliptical park path to widen as it approaches from the left of the painting until it winds halfway off the bottom edge of the canvas and turns back up just in time to foreshorten back into space along the right edge of the painting. The park path sweeps the eye across and

through the painting, and by slipping off the bottom edge of the canvas kicks the eye up and into the pictorial space. I discovered a similar elliptical element that I used in my painting *The Old Basketball Court (A Good Place to Drink Beer)*.

Cindy Tower's meaningful use of detail, was another influence. Tower refers to her paintings of abandoned factories along the Mississippi River as performance works, and this helped me better understand how making a painting on location was much more conceptually rich than I had originally thought. I think my taste for subject matter lies somewhere between the grotesque industrial decay of Cindy Tower and the lived-in but conveniently ignored 21<sup>st</sup> century landscapes of Rackstraw Downes.

## Conclusion

I was sitting on the old brown milk crate looking at my painting. I was hungry, and I didn't know if I would be able to paint the thing right.

"The expressway tilts and turns away from me, but it happens real slow. I have to fix it."

"You want a cigarette?" asked Oliver.

"No, thanks."

"You gotta think about it. It's not easy. Got to step back and think about it," reminded Oliver.

"Yeah. I don't know." I looked over to see Oliver very intently staring into my painting. I pushed at my thighs to stand up and stepped towards the painting.

When I first started painting and drawing outside I was escaping the confines of my studio. I needed a fresh perspective and different subject in order to find my voice as a painter. Looking back now I wish I had started painting and drawing around Baton Rouge much earlier. It finally provided me with an honest interaction with the community and its people, and in doing so gave me a purpose. *Facing Reality* is about engaging my surroundings in a specific and personal way. If my paintings are saying anything it would be, "Slow down. Pay attention."

So much of my time and energy in graduate school was dealing with the self-created problem of making a meaningful painting, one that deserves to exist and has a purpose. When I am outside and people stop to look at the pictures and speak with me about what I am doing I know that I am serving a purpose. The fact that the meaning of the work is rooted in the actual process of me being outside and making the art feels exciting and underscores the power of painting.

The pavement was so overcooked from the sun that it leaked heat through the bottoms of my boots. I could have been standing on a



stovetop. I must've looked odd with a red handkerchief hanging out the back of my blue trucker hat, and the collar of my long-sleeved pearl snap popped up to protect my neck from sunburn. A group of men who looked to be in their late twenties got out of a mud covered pick-up truck across the street. They wore jeans, dirty tee shirts, and boots that declared they had arrived to do some construction work. One of them cocked his head in confusion looking at me.

“Why are you drawing that?”

“I think it's weird that little chair sitting there. This place looks sad. If I don't draw it who will?”

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## Appendix: Drawings and Paintings



A1. *Rained Out*, Mixed media on paper, 2014



A2. *"That's a diesel powered pile driver."* Mixed media on paper, 2014



A3. *Where a house used to be...*, Mixed media on paper, 2014





A4. *Father-In-Law's Lot*, Mixed media on paper, 2014



*A5. Construction Site Painting (View from a Driveway), Oil on panel, 2014*



A6. *Long Night (Past Those Tracks)*, Oil on panel, 2015





*A7. The Old Basketball Court (A Good Place to Drink Beer), Oil on panel, 2015*



A8. *Off-Ramp Bouquet*, Oil on panel, 2014



A9. *Expressway Painting (Oliver's Hangout)*, Oil on panel, 2014

## Vita

Mitch Hobbs is a painter from Louisville, KY. After graduating Centre College in 2009, he joined Teach for America and was placed in Dumas, AR as an Elementary Art teacher. Hobbs taught K-12 and coached defensive line for the high school football team over the course of three years in Dumas before attending LSU as an MFA candidate in 2012. He intends to graduate in August 2015.