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Mixed feelings

Hillary McMahan

Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College

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MIXED FEELINGS

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
Hillary McMahan
B.A., Antioch College, 1992
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ABSTRACT

My thesis exhibition, entitled "Mixed Feelings," consisted of mostly figurative paintings and drawings. In this body of work I attempted to use fragments of the figure, separately and in combination with various objects and creatures, to create visual equivalents for a range of emotional states.

INTRODUCTION

I will start with where I began when I undertook graduate study in painting and drawing, because I believe this personal background is relevant to the shape my work has taken thus far. My path to painting, and to graduate school, has been different from that of most of my graduate school classmates, and some of my original reasons for choosing painting were different, I suspect, from theirs. Reasons for doing anything can change with time, though, and my reasons for continuing to make visual art have changed with increased experience and commitment.

I began painting at Antioch College, a tiny liberal arts college with one painting teacher. I had been an English major and a creative writing student at the University of Texas, and I felt myself to be a good writer, but I did not really love or even like the act of writing. I did not like to sit still, and I found it painful to recall or relive specific personal experiences in order to employ them in writing fiction or essays. At that time I was also involved in modern dance classes and performances; which I enjoyed very much, because it was expressive *and* physical, but I started that activity too late to pursue it seriously. It would not be untrue to say that I chose painting very deliberately by process of elimination. I had always felt the need to be involved in creative activity because I had things to say, not because I had prodigious talent in any single discipline. In my first painting class at Antioch College, I found that I could make an image that expressed what I thought or felt, without having to construct an entire narrative around it; and I could move around and manipulate materials while doing so, which appealed to my restless and fidgety nature.

Most art students begin by spending at least a couple of years acquiring basic skills, only later deciding how they will employ those skills to express some sort of personal vision. My experience has been the reverse, both for reasons of chance and education; and for reasons that have to do with my emotional and intellectual temperament. I feel I came to painting with a "top down" approach: dealing with the "what" and "why" first, and the "how" much later. As an undergraduate I learned little

about the tools and techniques of painting and drawing: my painting teacher at Antioch imparted a few basics in Painting I, but thereafter the curriculum was do-it-yourself. There were no art history classes to speak of, so I came to graduate school familiar with many contemporary artists but without an understanding of painting's history and trajectory. For a long time, in the intervening years between college and graduate school, and at the beginning of my graduate study, I experienced these deficits as frustrating, even crippling. Now that my technical skills are beginning to catch up, I accept this "backward" path and have even come to feel that while its drawbacks are many, it may also have some merits. I think it may be possible for an artist who has been outside the confines of the art world and art study to make work that has a certain breadth of purpose. I suppose what I mean is that I am interested in making art about life, not art about art. This is not to say that I am unconcerned with aesthetics or formal issues—I am more concerned with them now than ever. But I am interested in addressing questions in my work that are more philosophic than aesthetic, questions which a viewer without an art background might relate to. The painter Alex Colville, who feels similarly about his art's purpose, has said:

There are these basic questions: "What's it all about?"; "What's happening?"; "What is life like?" Of course there are no specific answers to these questions, perhaps no answers at all, but people who work with this sort of question in mind do tend, I suggest, to produce work which is interesting to some people who do not have a special interest in the visual arts.

Of the aesthetic experience, Colville has said:

If (the artist's) attention to the continuous buzz and flicker of experience and his struggle to transmit these into forms results in an authentic work, other people will experience from it a kind of ordering, fulfilling, illuminating sensation.

I know that the above-described experience is accessible to people who are not schooled in the visual arts, because it is what led me to art when I knew very little, and it is what continues to motivate me now that I know a bit more.

That "ordering, fulfilling, illuminating" experience arises out of the successful integration of subject, form and content—the what, how and why. Different artists order and prioritize these elements differently. I would like to use my relationship to subject, form and content to structure this discussion of my work: my work in general at this stage in my development, and the work I produced for "Mixed Feelings."

CONTENT

"Art is the pure realization of religious feeling, capacity for faith, longing for God. All other realizations of these, the outstanding human qualities, abuse those qualities by exploiting them: that is, by serving an ideology. Even art becomes 'applied art' just as soon as it gives up its freedom from function and sets out to convey a message. Art is human only in the absolute refusal to make a statement." –Gerhard Richter

"There ain't any answer, there ain't gonna be any answer, there never has been an answer, that's the answer" –Gertrude Stein

"Let go into the mystery" –Van Morrison

Content is the element that first motivates me to work. This is not my choice; if given the choice it might not be my preference. One of my graduate school colleagues begins paintings and drawings by making fairly random marks on the picture surface and responding to shapes and images that suggest themselves through these marks. I envy her way of working—maybe simply because the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence. Most of the time I seem to need an *idea* in order to start a painting or drawing. Whether this is a result of my "backward" art education or an essential trait of my creative character I am not sure. I think it is a bit of both. I think my imagination works on sort of a literary model: when I think about possible paintings or drawings I don't think much about lines or values or colors. I think in terms of metaphors, mini-narratives, whole images. The formal elements come later, after I begin to make the work.

The idea consists of an image that is accompanied, in my mind, by one or more meanings or associations. The image may not have the same associations or meanings for other people, and I am aware of that. But it might, and if it doesn't, it will have other meanings or associations, and that will allow the viewer to have an internal response to the work.

Perhaps it is a little ironic that content is what first motivates me, because the content in my work is so indefinite—in fact the content is about the indefinite. But if I have to pin it down, I will say the following: there are only a few themes; or truths, as I see

them, that motivate me to make paintings and drawings. Stated most broadly, they are:

- (a) the connectedness of all living beings and natural phenomena,
- (b) the impossibility of knowing the whole truth about existence, and
- (c) the simultaneous experience of being both separate from and a part of all that exists in the world (which relates back to "a")

Under the umbrella of the above truths, many more specific investigations are possible. In the work for "Mixed Feelings" I attempted to create visual equivalents for various emotional states; to make visible my interior life. In doing so I hoped to reveal a universal as well as a personal reality. Human emotions are universal, through time and across cultures, yet we experience them in a singular way. It is hard to believe that the quality and intensity of a particular feeling we experience as uniquely our own may exist in another individual whose life we can never live, in whose shoes we can never walk. But we *do* believe, or we would be incapable of empathy. The experience of being human is one of alternate and/or simultaneous alienation and merging.

Human emotions as subject and/or content in art also have much to do with truth "b" above. Emotions are of the self and originate with the self, but because they are universal and resist control by the will, they seem sometimes to come from someplace else. It has always seemed strange to me that it is possible—indeed common—to have a feeling one does not want to have, or to have a feeling that simultaneously coexists with its opposite. It also seems strange and incredible to me that it is possible to have a feeling one has never had before. If I have never had this feeling before, where did it come from? For me, this leads to all kinds of questions about consciousness and the nature of the self. Is there a kind of universal consciousness that flows through us as individuals? If so, what is its source? Are our experiences simply the result of particular chemical connections in the brain, or are they more than that? Are we more than that? My work cannot and does not attempt to answer such questions: I have found that it satisfies me just to ask them.

If I have a guiding paradigm for my work's content, it is that of *negative capability*, so named by the poet John Keats to describe a condition in which "...man is capable of

being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." The human condition is one of uncertainty. To pretend otherwise and to make art on the basis of that pretension is to make what Gerhard Richter calls "applied art": art that has an agenda beyond its own existence.

SUBJECT

"One of my problems is to find the Self, which has only one form and is immortal—to find it in animals and men, in the heaven and in the hell which together form the world in which we live."—Max Beckman

Because my work is about the transitory and unknowable nature of existence, I am most interested in painting and drawing living things. I like to depict living things because I identify with other living things. For me personally, art works that contain an image of a figure or a living creature generally have more emotional resonance than those that don't. I see myself in the rest of the living world and vice versa.

In this body of work I have depicted fragments of the figure, separately and in combination with other living creatures and various objects that have metaphoric significance for me. As I stated previously, I know the objects may not have the same associations for others. I choose the objects partly on the basis of their open-endedness; in other words I deliberately choose objects that have more than one possible association. Feathers, for example, could signify lightness, fragility, impermanence, smallness, mortality, or hope. When I started the painting I was thinking of a widely quoted Emily Dickinson poem:

"Hope is the thing with feathers
That perches in the soul
And sings the tune without the words
And never stops—at all"

It is not important that the viewer think of this poem also, in fact I would not want the painting to be seen as an illustration of the poem. The figure in the painting *Tiny Feathers* may be confronting her own insignificance, or experiencing an epiphany of hopefulness; or maybe both of those at the same time.

In creating visual equivalents for different interior states, I have used myself as a model but I have been deliberately evasive about my identity, cropping and fragmenting the figure so that my face cannot be (entirely) seen. Leaving such specific

information out, I feel, helps make these images more open to the viewer's own projections and steers me away from taking an approach that is overly illustrative.

Some of my subject matter is intended to have a humorous facet. The human capacity to have a feeling and to observe oneself having a feeling at the same time is interesting to me. My painting of myself with a bag over my head is meant to be a disturbing image but also a funny one. In the painting I am expressing my genuine feelings of guilt, fear, shame and dread while mocking the exaggerated nature of those feelings. In the diptych entitled *Crash*, which depicts a cropped figure and an upside-down toy airplane, I am representing a kind of interior disaster. A plane crash is a terrible thing, but the plane is a *toy* plane. I am alluding to the difficulty in knowing whether events in the mind are real or not, whether they are connected to an objective reality or not. In this piece, too, I am both acknowledging and making fun of my interior melodrama.

FORM

"...painting will never "die": it's too sexy.–Robert Levers

Form is the arena in which I've experienced the most growth over the past three years. Because it is the arena in which I have the most to learn, it is where I now spend the most time. It only takes a few minutes to decide that I want to make a drawing of my knees or a floating balloon. Creating the kind of space I want that drawing to have; making the marks and smudges and values and erasures work to express a mood or an intangible interior sensation; that is a struggle. It may seem obvious, but I think the most important thing I learned in graduate school is this: the content one wishes to put into an art work does not occur like a magical transmission from the mind of the artist but arise out of the concrete, formal elements of the work.

Influences

During my graduate study I have discovered many new artists to admire and to emulate in one way or another. I had favorite painters before I came to LSU, and thought of them as influences, but I lacked the formal vocabulary to say why exactly I liked these painters, and I had no real idea how I might incorporate things I admired in their work into my own. I have since come to realize that I am attracted to representational work that is carefully observed but also highly subjective. I like paintings that look like *paintings*, not like photographs or like "reality." Painting is not reality. I believe that painting has a special job to do, because painting can evoke reality in a way that reality can't evoke itself. The human eye does not see like a camera or a microscope—the eye is connected to a mind, which sees what is important to it. It is that subjective vision which appeals to me in the work of painters like Pierre Bonnard, Fairfield Porter, Michael Andrews, Avigdor Arikha, Joan Brown, Larry Stanton, Albert York, Alice Neel. In their work what is important is emphasized and what is less important is not. Not all areas of a painting are treated the same way. Color and line

are employed in the service of emotional as well as physical description. This kind of painting, to me, is very human. This subjectivity is like the subjective attitude of a lover toward his or her beloved—it is one of the reasons painting is so sexy.

Methods

As I confessed earlier, I often work from an insistent image that comes to me all at once: it is either found somewhere in the world or is conjured in my mind's eye. If I cannot create or recreate the image with actual things in my studio, I will try to take a photograph of what I am picturing and work from that. In this body of work roughly half the drawings and paintings were done from life and half from photographs. I am successful about half the time with both ways of working, so have not chosen one and discarded the other. I do not know if I will ever be able to work entirely without the aid of photographs, because much imagery that interests me is logistically hard to work with any other way.

Most of the time I paint in a fairly direct way, without a lot of underpainting or underdrawing. I may do a cursory underdrawing in vine charcoal or with the paint itself. I like the freshness that can result from working this way, but it is dangerous: there are many ways to make mistakes, and too many revisions can lead to a point of no return. With drawings, too, I jump right in on the "good" paper, erasing and rubbing out as needed, without making preliminary thumbnails or sketchbook drawings. To be honest, my sketchbook has more writing in it than drawings. Some of my working methods come from an internal impatience that is mine alone; but sometimes I think these choices have a lot to do with the anxiety that the expectations and time constraints of graduate school produce in me. I know that I need to make work *right now*, that there has to be an end product and there won't be enough time—so I decide there is no time for preliminary explorations.

I tend to favor warm colors and high-key values. In the beginning of my graduate study this was an unconscious, intuitive choice. I have since discovered at least one reason for it. The imagery in my work is sometimes melancholy or expresses unease, and I think the use of warm color and light values, along with the humor I mentioned

earlier, helps keep angst in check. Life is both heavy and light; both painful and joyful: I would like my paintings to have this same balance.

I do not know if my current working methods are right or wrong. I feel that I am in an early stage of my development as a painter, especially my formal development, and my working methods are still evolving. Now that I am about to be free of the time constraints of graduate school, I want to try new, more process-oriented ways of working. I would like to make more sketches and try a different palette, just to see what happens. There will never be enough time, I realize. Life is short and art is very, very long. The world will always expect finished works from an artist, if she wants to call herself an artist. There is (almost) always a gap between the artist's intent and the actual work. My gap, currently, is quite enormous. I am trying to get on both sides of the gap to narrow it while accepting its continual presence.

CONCLUSION

I once described one or two of my paintings to someone as "cheerfully existential." I was joking, but I realized later that I meant it; that the phrase captured something of what I want to convey with my work. Painting is a life-affirming activity, like cooking or sex. It is a way of railing against the void. I was not raised with organized religion, and I do not know if I believe in a God. But I agree with Gerhard Richter that art is an expression of a capacity for faith. When I paint or draw I am expressing faith that the activity means something, and that the image means something, and that this meaning will keep me away from the abyss. Maybe there is a God, I am trying to say with my images of knees and balloons and feathers and praying mantises; but look: even an indifferent universe, seen in the right light, is a wonder to behold.

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Knees. Oil on canvas, 10" x 12"



Feathers. Oil on canvas, 14" x 14"



Short-Lived Creatures. Oil on canvas, 24" x 36"



The Threat of Possibility. Charcoal on paper, 21" x 28"



Crash. 40 5/8" x 29 3/8" and 18 5/8" x 20"

VITA

Hillary McMahan was born in 1967 in Corpus Christi, Texas, and grew up in Austin, Texas. She attended the University of Texas at Austin and Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio. She received a Bachelor of Arts degree from Antioch College in 1992. She has participated in group exhibitions in Austin and Baton Rouge; and received workshop scholarships from Penland School of Crafts and Anderson Ranch Arts Center. She will receive the degree of Master of Fine Arts in August 2002.