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## Urban monuments

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# URBAN MONUMENTS

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

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by  
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## ABSTRACT

Surviving in poverty in an urban environment is hard work. Fear of not having basic needs creates desperation, and not being able to improve upon these conditions can test ones patience and faith in others. The simple routine of daily life can be monumental. Small achievements can be huge moments for some and irrelevant to others. One learns to appreciate and hate what one has. *Urban Monuments* comes from a struggle to understand what painting is to me and the relationship it has with this idea. Working hard to better ones self or ones situation is a noble cause but it is by no means a guarantee. These urban monuments commemorate the struggle to survive in an unforgiving environment.

## WHY PAINT?

Prior to this series of work, I questioned the importance of drawing and painting images from observation when thinking about work conceptually. What is the point of working with traditional media with the rise of digital works and interactive applications that can facilitate conversation towards ideas more efficiently? I constructed imagined compositions with software from internet sources that engage social and political concerns while simultaneously addressing the issue of paint manipulation (Figure 1).



Figure 1: *Untitled, Oil on panel 2012*

Working in this way gives paint a position among these relatively new mediums and I assessed its value to my process. I was interested in the ideas of the digitally constructed works, but felt they offered no room for exploration of paint. I found that I cannot approach work with a clear idea because arriving at the notion of the idea completes the piece and no longer requires further investigation of paint's physical nature. That resulted in work that was flat and void of the human touch. My routine struggle and failure with painting and drawing is necessary for the movement towards that human presence in the work that I define as artful. Manipulating material

with formal concerns allows the work to transform in a more organic way that assists in my understanding of the forms context. I am left with images that still address social concerns but are generated with a more passive attitude through exploration of materials. This was necessary to inject a sense of special ambiguity in the works of *Urban Monuments*.

## SURVIVING

I am compelled to paint structures and spaces that are a part of my routine in my urban environment. Impoverished neighborhoods are familiar; they are where I grew up. The neighborhood served as a playground, school, and social network- I am a product of its upbringing. Individuals come to understand earlier that they need to work hard to improve their situation. I create monuments that commemorate surviving in these communities. Bus stops, benches, trash bins, toilets, mailboxes, and working class people: these are the physical bystanders in my daily experience. A large section of the population can relate to the sensations we associate with carrying out daily tasks. In consequence, these objects and their places help me express my interest in our ordinary workday and the incredible frustration that can manifest within it. Activities such as throwing out the trash, commuting to work and washing dishes are not exciting but necessary in maintaining our lives. Mundane events occupy more time than the moments which carry more meaning. Artistically, I like to recognize these forgettable instances, as I see them as the foundation of our survival.



## UNNOTICED

The physical history upon these structures- specifically graffiti, trash and stains- express the condition of the area. That neglected appearance is one of the catalysts for my investigation of these structures and their relationship to their surroundings. I would like the viewer to inspect the paintings as monuments in the same manner. I create an image that explains how I experience the neighborhood, not only how I see them. This is evident with the treatment of the space around the forms and the use of unnatural color. The frequent sense of abandonment makes me want to draw attention to them; like our mundane daily activities, these structures can also pass unnoticed. The absence of people in the paintings helps promote a common attitude that I find in my community. There is a sense of both distrust and love for people that occupy these spaces. The absence of the human element makes the viewer even more conscious of others and their place. Through their use, common people lend these spaces a sense of integrity. Leaving these spaces void of population injects the painting with the dual relationship- love and distrust- which we have with our neighbors. Still the human presence remains in their absence insuring their survival.

## PROCESS

The space and structure undertake a transformation through the act of drawing from observation. Formal qualities such as measurement, perspective and compositional construction are my primary concerns when addressing a formation that provokes interest. There is a tremendous amount of visual information present in a passing moment and attempting to catch it through drawing is difficult. Decisions are made to capture the instant immediately. The tight geometry present in the work *Junk Mail* (see Appendix, page 7) represents an effort to quickly and accurately portray the space with drawing. While photography is a more efficient medium for these quick moments, drawing captures these instances with my eyes and hand physically involved in the creation of form. The pencil is an extension of my hand and rides the surface of the structure as it describes the contours and shifts in value among the forms. This physical connection gets me closer to experiencing the site and understanding the monuments potential. Working exclusively with the observational studies, I enlarge them to a monumental scale so that I may swim in the space and surface of the work with paint. This is a more fluid connection with the form and space. I address this final piece with the same formal concerns as the studies, but embrace the small abstraction that occurs when moving from site to studio. The drawing maintains the composition and I can explore the unpredictable nature of paint without thinking about building or sustaining that structure. This freedom helps insert the emotional response I seek from the final work.

## CONCLUSION

My respect for people's efforts to survive is expressed in spaces and objects that are used regularly to maintain their lives. The urban struggle is not a new one but these works represent our contemporary imagery and conditions. These monuments are left to describe the nature of these daily struggles in a beautifully crude manner.

APPENDIX: PAINTINGS



*A1. Routine Place, Oil on Paper 2013*



*A2. Junk Mail, Oil on Paper 2013*



*A3. Out of Order, Oil on Paper 2014*



*A4. Morning, Oil on Paper 2014*



*A5. Family Portrait, Oil on Paper, 2014*



*A6. I Did them Yesterday, Oil on paper, 2014*





*A7. Save More, Oil on Paper, 2014*



*A8. Changing the light, Oil on Paper, 2014*



*A9. Missing, Oil on Paper, 2014*



*A10. Living Space, Oil on Paper, 2014*



## VITA

David Contreras was born in Robstown, Texas and received his BFA from Texas A&M University Corpus Christi in 2010. David's inspirations include the urban landscape, family, and friends. He enjoys communicating his ideas and theories about art with the sculptors, print makers and landscape architects in the college of art and design. He has taught drawing and 2D design at Louisiana State University. He expects to receive his Master of Fine Art degree in August 2014 and plans to continue to make art and research painting techniques in Los Angeles.