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Drugged Paranoia and Warlust

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Drugged Paranoia and Warlust

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 Arts

by

Nathan Pietrykowski
B.S., University of Southern Indiana, 2011
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ABSTRACT

Drugged Paranoia and Warlust are stories of human depravity and violence that happened on an abandoned U.S. military base in the rural world of Indiana. These tales are told through a series of prints, drawings, animation and a comic. Scenes of bombings, mass graves, and drug overdoses are presented as humorous cartoons in playful colors to subvert the viewer into exploring imagery that discusses serious and somewhat bleak issues. The work in this exhibition is both satire of absurd events and trying to find meaning amongst madness.



Figure 1. Nathan Pietrykowski, *All of Us*, 2014

INTRODUCTION/TEXT FROM THE COMIC *DRUGGED PARANOIA AND WARLUST*

I can remember the feeling of that place, everyone worked up into a state of drugged paranoia and warlust.

Old timers recall how the military base was created: "They kicked us off our land, right off our farms, then they built up a fence. Fighter jets were swarming all over and they used our homes and barns for target practice."

The base manufactured and tested bombs daily until the mid 90's. When the Army abandoned the place, what they left behind was nothing good. The area was deemed too dangerous to clean up. Duds riddled the woods. Tons of depleted uranium were buried shallow in the ground. Animals with bizarre mutations roamed the compound. Forgotten bunkers became squatter homes for cooking meth and throwing wild, sex-crazed raves.

The military left behind live ammunition, guns, grenades and bombs. I can remember cops selling fully automatic guns from the trunks of squad cars. Armed robberies and hunting accident rates spiked. A burned body was found in my neighbor's field, putting the region on edge, quick to violence and right in the middle of a long drug binge.

By the time the U.S. entered into the "*War on Terror*," I was no older than thirteen, working in a makeshift factory, located at the center of the old base. We made cheap boxes for the army that were used to ship bombs and bullets to the Middle East.

One day, I read the funnies in the Sunday paper. On the front page was a funeral procession for a child killed in some unpronounceable Iraqi town. The child's coffin was a rugged box discarded by U.S. troops. It looked almost identical to the boxes being made at my job. Learning that I might be a pseudo-coffin maker caused me recurring nightmares.

Wading through the bones of this place, events look linked together like skeletal remains tenuously jointed to the next.

ON VIOLENCE

The exhibition *Drugged Paranoia and Warlust* is a series of stories about the Jefferson County Proving Ground, a military base in Southern Indiana that I grew up only a few miles away from. Even though the region surrounding the base saw times of both war and peace, it always felt like war. The screaming of jets, the blasts of bombs, plumes of smoke and the constant production of weapons gave the impression of a never ending war. There was always an enemy far away in a country we never heard of until we invaded. The surrounding counties unified around the military base's warmongering and manufacturing of weapons. It was a source of employment, routine and authority for the region. When it closed, the unity that held the community together degenerated. The stories told in this body of work are of the locals trying to fill the void after the base closed down but all they were left with was *warlust*. Unfortunately, the only thing that can fill the void of violence, is violence itself. Nothing is solved.

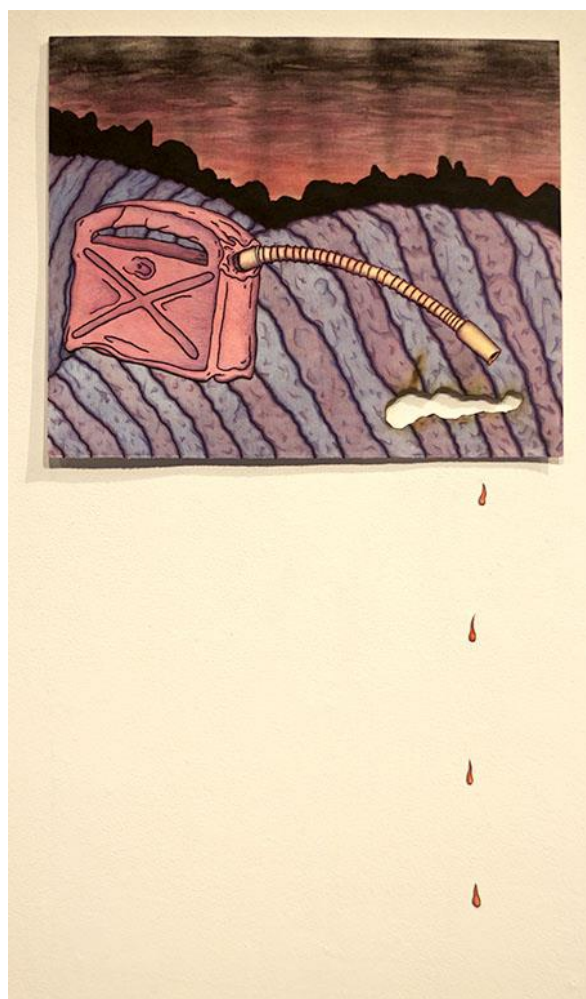


Figure 2. Nathan Pietrykowski, *What's Left of Her*, 2014

War correspondent, Chris Hedges, stated “War is the most important narcotic invented by humankind,” in his book, *War is the Force that Gives Us Meaning*, “... allowing us to engage in lusts and passions that we keep hidden in the deepest, private, interiors of our fantasy life.” Violence gives us the power to be God and decide who or what deserves to exist. Through force or the fear of it, any desire is achievable. Lunch money forked over, orders carried out and basic human rights are taken through violence. It is the power, the joys and the excitement that violence offers that keeps humankind addicted to the narcotic. “When we see an addiction for what it is. When we understand ourselves and how war has perverted us. Life becomes hard to bare” (Hedges). After witnessing crisis and mass destruction, the human mind wants to erase these horrible memories from existence. This is done in numerous ways but for this exhibition I only focus on one, drugs. They are mind pacifiers, the feel good maskers of pain. I have witnessed their use and abuse as my close friends return home from wars in the Middle East. The effects of drugs slowly distort the body as much as they distort the mind of their users, deteriorating them into human skeletons. At least once a week I receive a call from my mother who works at the county jail and I am told the current physical and mental status of friends that are incarcerated where she works. I have heard of teeth falling from people’s mouths as if in stress ridden dreams and organs that stop working in bodies not even 25 years old. In short, I am not a stranger to the horrid effects of trying to suppress painful memories through drug use. This process of destroying painful memories is not a series of battles between nations and their people but a lonely internal struggle.

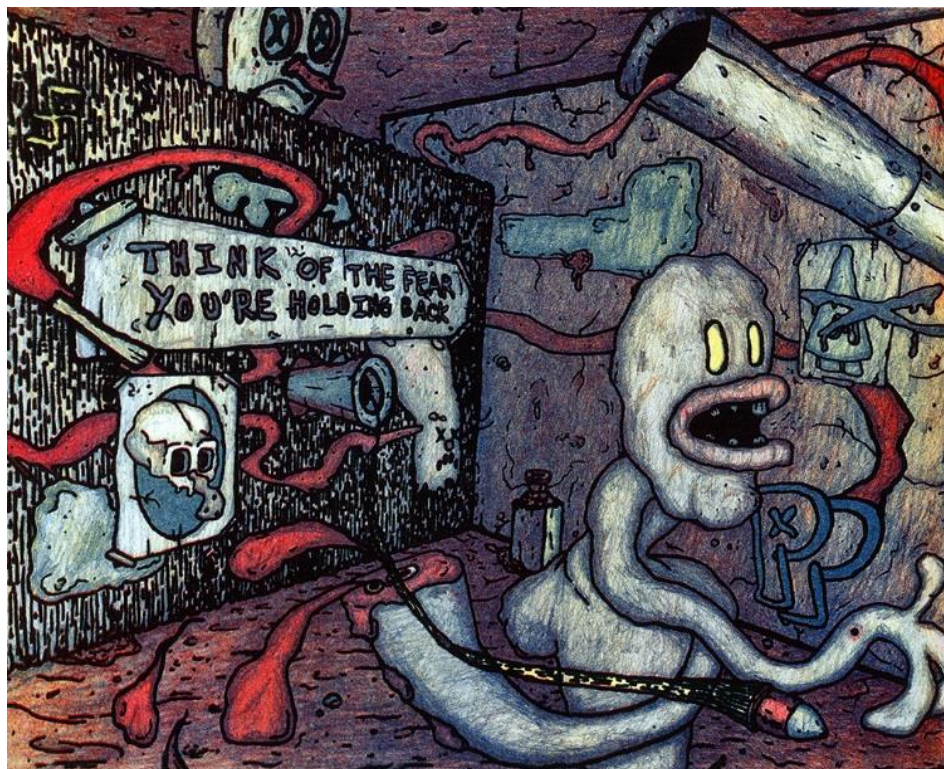


Figure 3. Nathan Pietrykowski, *Backstage at Damien's Dive*, 2013

STORYTELLING AND CATHARSIS

I have found sharing these experiences helps to resolve this conflict. Whether it is riddled with sarcasms, tongue-in-cheek jokes or encrypted in metaphors, telling stories about trauma, it is essentially a self-exorcism. It is a purging, making the internal, external. Sharing stories is a means of connecting, overcoming fears and working toward closure.



Figure 4. Nathan Pietrykowski, *Drugged Paranoia Warlust* (cover), 2014

Drugged Paranoia and Warlust is a collection of tales. Some I experienced and others were told to me. The exhibition immerses the viewer in violent narratives linked to the base. These stories are approached in a variety of mediums to keep the overall exhibition from becoming formulaic and to challenge myself by working outside of the realm of traditional printmaking. When planning the work for the exhibition, a written component seemed necessary to connect the stories and various mediums together. From memories scribbled in sketchbooks, poems and prose were formed. The writing was edited and distilled into what became a comic. Creating a comic book complemented the aesthetics of the show. The time-based medium of comics helps lead the viewer through the narratives and create a context for the work. Through self-publishing the comics, I was able to create an edition of comics large enough to allow each viewer to take one with them as they explored the gallery. The exhibition space is filled with prints, drawings and large scale installations. Each piece in the show is in part a

drawing whether it is printed onto paper or collaged onto the wall. The scale of the large installation helps to encompass the viewer in the narrative. This is the case for *Target Practice at Dusk* where the “battle scene” fills an entire wall of the gallery. The scale gives the sense that the viewer is immersed in the landscape and physically present for these events.



Figure 5. Nathan Pietrykowski, *Target Practice at Dusk*, 2014

I am able to convey most of the stories through two-dimensional images. The work *Recurring Nightmare* required animation to achieve its complex narrative. The time sensitivity of animation was crucial to depicting the piles of body parts building up. Having the piece presented on a continual loop reflects that the story was a recurring dream. The repetitive cycle of the animation refers back to violence creating itself without resolution.

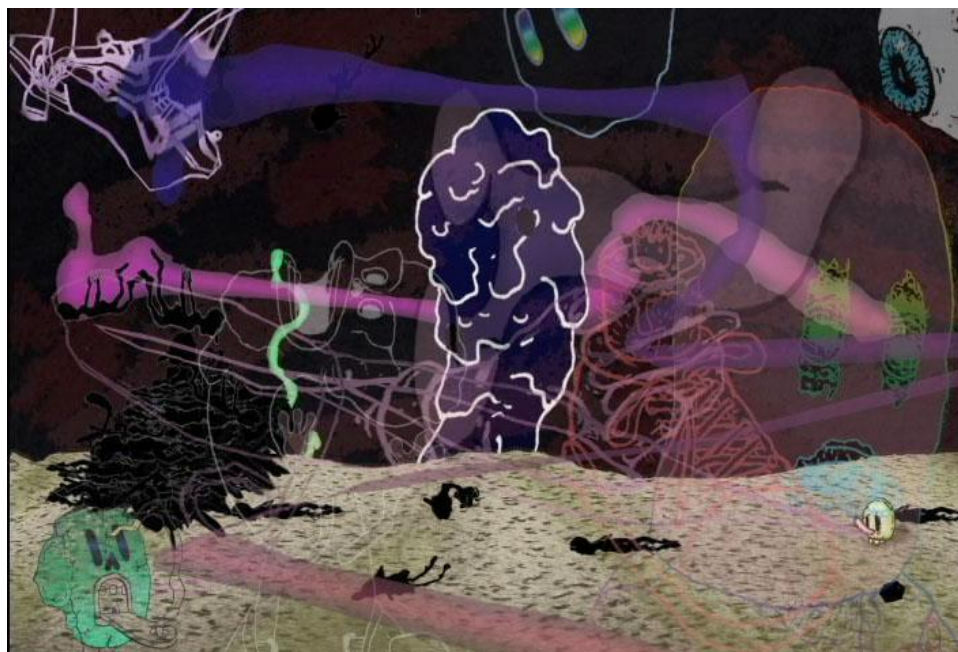


Figure 6. Nathan Pietrykowski, *Recurring Nightmare*, 2014

CARTOONING

The “cartoonish” aesthetic throughout *Drugged Paranoia and Warlust* is as much inspired by the military base as the stories. While the base was still open there would be holiday celebrations in which parades and airshows would be put on for the local civilians and I would always go to these. My favorite part of the visits would be the old fighter jets and bombers that were on display. Crazy paintings of cartoon characters riding bombs, skulls, fierce tiger faces and girls decorated the sides of these metal birds. The pairing of cartoon characters, nudy girls and big bad bombers was a perfect match for a young farm boy like myself.

The print *Losing Virginitiy (the Pornography of Violence)* portrays one of my earliest memories of art. It was a crude and racist painting on the side of a plane. Witnessing Nose Art at a young age sparked my interest in cartooning and brought humor into my early drawings. This interest has carried over through the years into my current body of work.

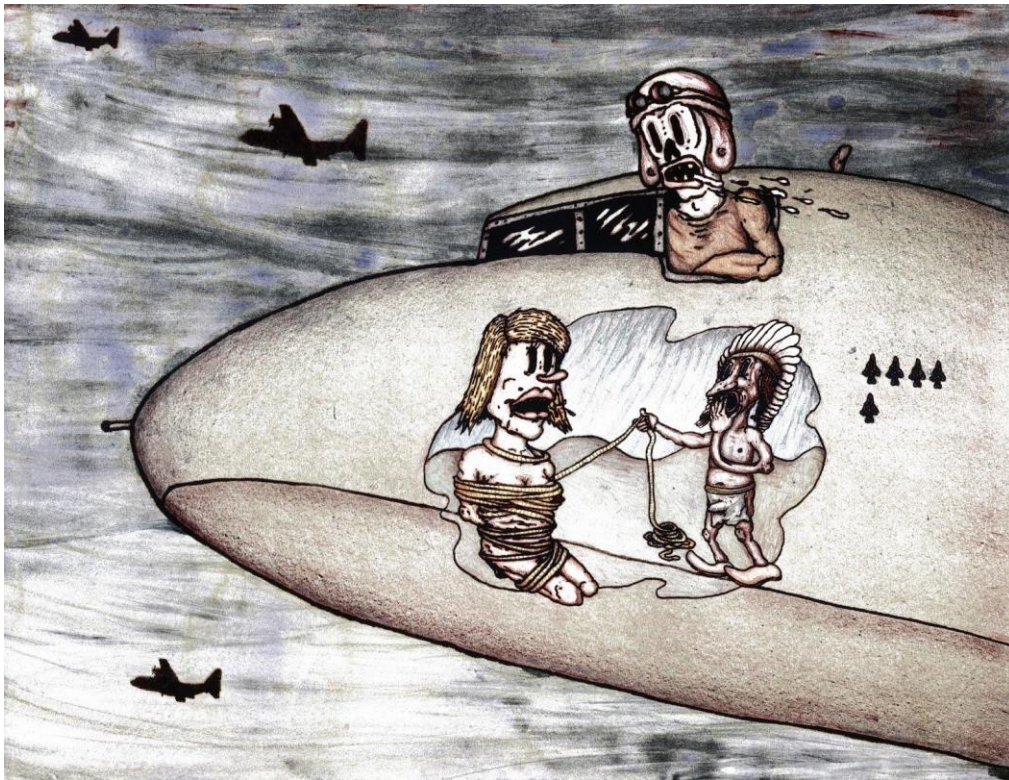


Figure 7. Nathan Pietrykowski, *Losing Virginitiy (the Pornography of Violence)*, 2014

Drawing in this style connects the aesthetic of my work with the history of the base but it also connects my art with a long lineage of political art. There is a genre of art that deals with political and social issues rendered in a “cartoonish” style. This is apparent in Goya’s *The Disasters of War*, the work of the Neue Sachlichkeit movement, the paintings of Philip Guston and contemporary collaged prints of Brian Chippendale. For centuries now, numerous artists have worked in this manner, making their politically charged art relatable and accessible to a wide audience.

Cartooning is a way of abstracting, not different from breaking a form down into planes or shapes of color. According to the comic's theorist Scott McCloud, cartooning is a process of "amplification through simplification. When we abstract an image through cartooning, we're not so much eliminating details as we are choosing to focus on specific details. By stripping down an image to its essential "meaning" an artist can amplify that meaning in a way that realistic art can't." (McCloud 1994, 30)

Much of how the stories are told in this exhibition comes from how the characters are depicted. The character "is a vacuum into which our identity and awareness are pulled... an empty shell that we inhabit which enables us to travel into another realm. We don't just observe the cartoon, we become it!" (McCloud 1994, 36). Viewers identify with simply drawn cartoon characters. The simpler the character, the more the viewer "inhabits" and identifies with the character. Just the opposite happens when the character is rendered with more detail and complexity. The viewer cannot identify with the character and perceives it as someone else. This is apparent in most cartoons, comics and art. A hero, let's say Mickey Mouse, is rendered very simply, almost resembling a stick figure with big ears, while the villain, Pete with his large frame, unshaven face, tufts of hair and big teeth is a character drawn in more detail. This principle of viewer-identification plays a major role in political art. It not only helps establish the protagonist and antagonist in a story, but it causes viewers to relate to the characters. The viewer feels empathetic toward characters that are rendered with only the essential elements needed to depict a figure, while highly detailed scenes leave the viewer feeling as though they are a voyeur.

The level of detail a character is presented in plays a large role in the stories told in *Drugged Paranoia and Warlust*. There is no protagonist or hero to be found in my image cycle. This leaves only victims and victimizers. Often in this body of work the two character types are drawn quite similarly. In a few cases the victimizers are the less detailed characters causing the viewer to feel conflicted about which character they identify more with.

While cartooning is a form of abstraction, it is also a means for storytelling. I employ a constantly growing vocabulary of pictorial icons used in the stories I tell. Icons like talk bubbles, multiple panels and motion lines interject sound, dialogue, movement and time into a static two-dimensional image. I use them in relating a narrative and directing content. When the pairing of characters, icons and text is successful, the cartoon is a time-based medium. Guns fire, bullets whizz across the image and hit their target. There is a starting point to each image, and icons that lead you through the story, toward intended content.

THE SUGAR COATING (HUMOR AND COLOR)

“The Gag” is a big part of cartooning. The cartoon was made for humor. I utilize humor often in my art but want to achieve more than a one liner or a single panel joke. Humor is ridiculous, a joke and an understatement, causing the viewer to let their guard down and engage with difficult content. After the initial chuckles and giggles the narrative turns dark and ugly, leaving the viewer feeling conflicted about laughing at a grotesque image.

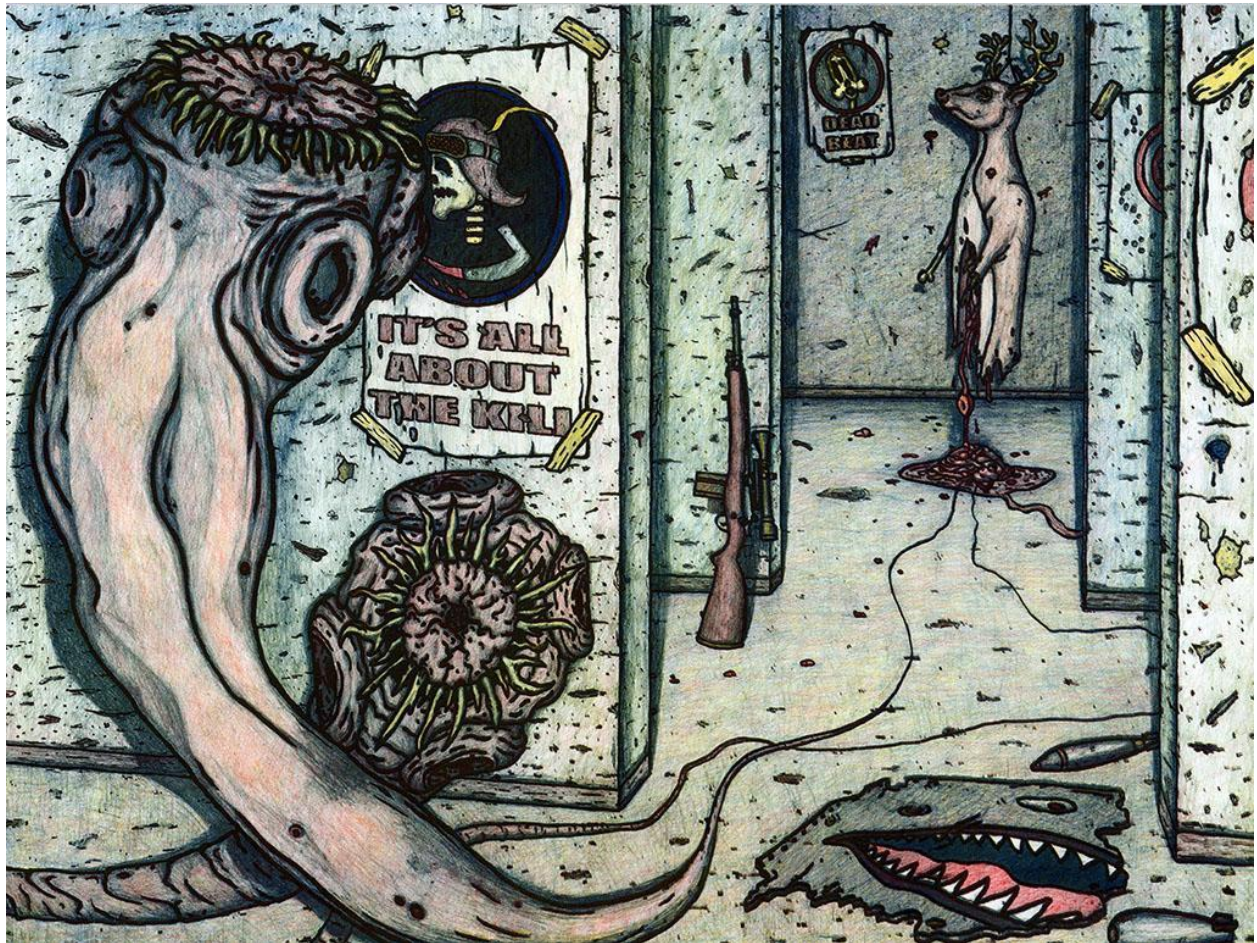


Figure 8. Nathan Pietrykowski, *the Collector*, 2013

Color is used much the same as humor in my tales. Color is used as bait. It catches the viewer's eye from across a gallery and drags them over. Many of the works in the exhibition are drenched in playful pastels and loud acidic colors. The pairing of a cartoonish drawing style, loud colors and the subject matter of violence and drugs isn't new. This combination can be found in the early Underground Comixs of the 1960's, art from the Chicago Imagist movement and the paintings of Peter Saul. While these artist's works share similarities, their reasons for using bright, playful colors differ greatly. While the color palette of many of these artists are influenced by and celebrate psychedelic drug use, the work in this exhibition does not. The colors of *Drugged Paranoia* and *Warlust* are not the colors of the revolution and counter

culture. They are not about experimenting and expanding your mind. The colors in this show are sickly pastels. It is about the bright pink bloodshot eyes of a hangover and the fleshy purple lips of an overdose. In the piece *All of Us*, the color palette of the pastel work is almost soothing but with further examination the mound is a pile of bones. The cheery purples and bright yellows reference bruises and rotten organs. While the palette in the work *The Collector* sets the tone of the story. The jaundice yellow and the washed-out greens give the feeling of being in a eerie basement lite by fluorescent lights. The tone established by the colors in the print *Party Till "THEY" Drop* is portrayed as a celebration with its bright blasts of color against the deep grays and dark purples as a rave being held in a bunker. With investigation, used syringes are found littering the dance floor, bombs dangle on ropes over the crowd and light beams from disco balls are cutting people in half. The image at first appears to be a raging party but soon becomes a bad trip. The candy-colors in my work are the sugar coating on the bitter pill. Once the viewer has gotten past the sugar coating, they are left with the content. They are looking at a grisly image of a mutilated head, a shootout, or mass grave. The use of playful, bright colors and humor makes the horror unexpected, making it more grotesque.

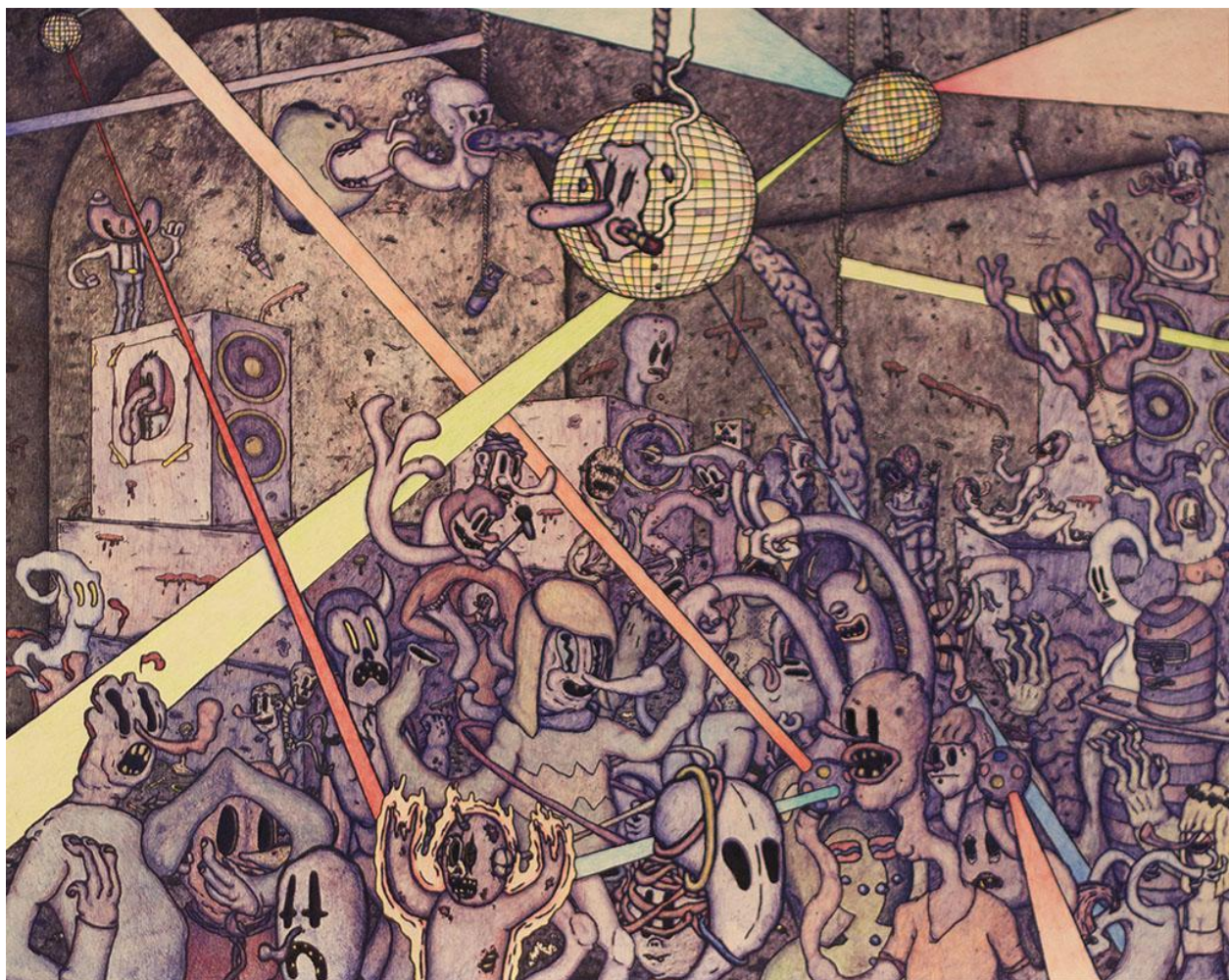


Figure 9. Nathan Pietrykowski, *Party Till "THEY" Drop*, 2014

CONCLUSION

This exhibition was an exploration discovering the history of the region I grew up in. Independent acts of violence slowly mounted and it became clear that they were connected. This place is stuck in a cycle of violence that seems to always have existed and will never end. The work has brought me to a point of self-resolution through telling stories and gaining closure on these events. During this process, I have learned how sharing experiences becomes a means of connecting with others and working toward resolution. In the future, I want to further this idea by using my work to help others communicate and share their stories.



Figure 10. Nathan Pietrykowski, *Installation View 1*, 2014



Figure 11. Nathan Pietrykowski, *Installation View 2*, 2014

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VITA

Nathan Pietrykowski was born in Madison, Indiana in 1989. He received his Bachelors of Science in Studio Art from the University of Southern Indiana in 2011. He will be receiving his Master of Fine Arts in Printmaking from Louisiana State University the summer of 2014.