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The still beat

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THE STILL BEAT

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Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
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Master of Fine Arts**

in

The School of Art

**by
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B.A., Centre College, 2000
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Abstract

The Still Beat is an exhibition that combines still-life painting with original pop music in a gallery setting. This written thesis examines the process of developing these two distinct bodies of work into a unified exhibition.

The Still Beat

The Still Beat is the name of a body of work that I have been developing throughout the past year. It consists of two components: 1. a group of still-life paintings 2. a pop album. The initial concept was to place these components in a gallery setting where they would become integrated into one piece in which the music and paintings became unified into one coherent work. That didn't happen. What did happen was the parallel development of two distinct bodies of work that, while ultimately separate, influenced each other greatly. Here I will investigate the influence of each element upon the other, discuss the prevailing themes that run throughout both, and investigate various other concerns that arose throughout the project. Ultimately, however, this wasn't a particularly conceptual exercise. I'm just a person that likes to do two different things, and wants to see if they can be put together. Throughout the project if I started to get frustrated or overwhelmed, I tended to keep coming back to the same quote from Joe Strummer. It's from the "Punk" volume of Ted Haimes' *History of Rock & Roll* video series: "The unspoken message of Punk, or New Wave, or whatever you want to call it, is that it's fun to be alive. It's a whole lot better than being dead." He should know.

The Paintings

I've been a still-life painter for a while. I'm not entirely sure why. It has something to do with being attracted to inanimate objects; the fact that I get to decide what they are, what they do, and what they mean. I feel the same way about pop music. Once I own a record it's mine, and I get to determine the significance of each song, lyric, or instrument, and how each plays out in my own private dictionary of symbols.

When I began to think about how I might visually involve my music with the paintings, I immediately thought in terms of still-life objects. More specifically, I decided to employ the tools involved in the recording process as still-life objects. Mics, keyboards, cables, my 4-track: all of this stuff started making it's way into the images. It made perfect sense; I could describe the materials of the recording studio the same way I had been doing with the materials of the painting studio. There was a problem however. None of the songs were about keyboards or 4-tracks (although I love my 4-track unconditionally and feel certain I could write several songs about it); they were about people and human relationships. Which I suppose is why I quickly abandoned this initial idea and began to allow the paintings to become more human; taking on increasingly figurative qualities until they soon looked more like puppets acting out plays than traditional still-life paintings.

For me that's when things began to get more interesting. Once this initial bread had occurred, I felt free to begin incorporating whatever visual elements I wanted. If I liked the pink album cover of Beck's *Sea Change*, I would make a pink painting. If I thought it was cool how Sonic Youths album *EVOL* was the word love spelled backwards, it went in a painting. This also got me thinking about painters that seemed to evoke the characteristics of pop music. Soon, Munch became my new favorite painter. His painting, *Eye in Eye*, of a young couple awkwardly gazing at each other after school seemed like it was set to the Tommy and the Shondells' sixties hit, "I Think We're Alone Now." So I made *Ballad Edit*; a painting which directly steals the premise of *Eye in Eye*. Thus, this change made me feel liberated not only in terms of incorporating elements

from music culture, but also in terms of what I looked for in painting. In a sense, I began not to care as much about the formal ideas about painting that I'd always assumed were the most important. Instead, it began to become a vehicle to describe something else, rather than an end unto itself.

The Songs

I have been trying to write songs since I was around thirteen years old. During the first decade of this enterprise, every single pursuit ended tragically. More specifically, each song I attempted was in actuality a sophomore derivative of some other, better song by some individual with actual life experience after whom I was trying to model myself. I started painting around the age of nineteen. During the first years of painting, I took a break from music. I wouldn't say that I lost interest, but I began to feel resigned to the apparent truth that songwriting was beyond my grasp. After being intoxicated by painting for about four years, I started trying to write again. It was still fairly hopeless, but I was slowly beginning to understand the architecture of songwriting. It was about structure; structures within structures. Similarly, the recording process was about layers and the ability to predict and observe how these layers fit together. For me, paintings was very much about those same concerns; and I feel beyond certain that my progress in songwriting came through an understanding of process that I acquired in painting.

The album I recently completed for this project, also called *The Still Beat*, is the first full length I've made. It's also the first time I've worked in a real recording studio. Initially I was intimidated, but in the end it came together more seamlessly than I

would've predicted. I think the reason that it worked was because I was given a key to the studio and could work there alone, late at night; the same way I'd been recording in my bedroom for a couple of years. The painting's influence over the music is probably less pronounced than the reverse. However, the transformations and new liberties occurring in the painting studio did, I believe allow me to make a more diverse album than I had anticipated.

Initially, I wanted to make a very sunny sounding pop record with a kind of perverse, pessimistic underbelly. Those elements are there I think, but I also became increasingly interested in creating more developed narratives inside of the songs. Part of this came from my interest in the traditional ballad, which is a form of song I came to know through my family. But part of this also came from my interest in Munch's Frieze of Life series, and, as described earlier, I came to see Munch as an early practitioner of the pop music sensibility. Everything about his work, its emblematic nature, its quickness, its adolescence, seemed to embody the subjects that would fill this type of music for the next century. This influence, along with a healthy dose of Baudelaire and songwriters such as The Go-Betweens, Nick Cave, and The Magnetic Fields, injected me with an urge to place stories within the songs. Not necessarily complete stories that would exist throughout the album, but small narrative details that would suggest the kind of iconic scenarios that are employed over and over again throughout pop songs, ancient ballads, and even narrative paintings. Likewise, the paintings in the show also seem to portray some of the iconic scenarios and emotional states described in the music.

The Show

Initially, my ideas for the gallery synthesis of the music and paintings was much more formal. I thought that it would be interesting to investigate how the structural elements of painting corresponded to those of writing and recording. In the end though, this seemed a little stiff for a body of work that felt more casual and fun. I decided that the main focus would be to simplify and let the work speak for itself. However, I wanted to add a few elements that would make the setting more in line with a rock show than that of a white-walled gallery. I had a friend who does silk-screed posters for rock shows do one for my show and posted it in the gallery. I also made buttons with images from the paintings (anyone truly infatuated with pop music can't resist buttons). To make the music available, I placed headphones around the gallery as initially planned. I feel that listening to music over headphones makes it a much more intimate, involved experience, so I wanted to maintain that element of my initial thesis proposal. I also played the album out-loud in the room in order to expose the audience to as much of the album as possible. Hopefully, these inclusions have allowed the exhibition to integrated the record and the paintings in a manner more complementary to the spirit of the work.

Loose Ends

I forget the actual quote, but the painter R.B. Kitaj once said something like, "I'd rather be an interesting painter than a good painter." I've always preferred artists that work in this spirit; artists with a lot of loose ends that don't necessarily add up, but who always leave you certain of their curiosity, uncertainty, and inability to settle down. I'd

like to identify a few of the loose ends that pop up in *The Still Beat* as a way to address some secondary themes running throughout the work.

The Ruralists

Somewhere during the second half of this project I rediscovered the painter Peter Blake as well as the album *The Village Green Preservation Society* by the Kinks. During the prime of late sixties London, Blake escaped from the epicenter of the British art world to found The Brotherhood of Ruralists in the countryside. While there, his paintings, though still influenced by his earlier Pop sensibility, became more mystical and celebratory. You got the sense he was doing exactly what he wanted without a second thought. Around the same time, Ray Davies of the Kinks did the same thing. Having scored an endless string of hit records, Davies abandoned this momentum and left for the country to record a concept album about the nostalgia and simplicity of his rural past. The album is extremely unique in that it revels in tradition and leisure at a time when Davies' contemporaries were making the most aggressive, political albums of their careers (consequently, the album bombed).

I became fascinated with the idea of these artists applying their extremely sharp and witty urban sensibilities to the subject of the country life. This may be because my own experience of moving from Brooklyn to Louisiana seemed to echo their paths in some small way. This influence came out more prominently in the music (songs like "The Ruralist," "The Ill-Matched Unknowns," and others), though it also brought hints of the landscape into some of the later paintings (*Ballad Edit* and *A Bummer in the Summer*). For these works, I took simplified, pixelated images of horizon lines and

adapted them into abstracted grids which served as backgrounds. I think it also affected some of the later objects I chose; the use of paper airplanes, horse bits, and ukuleles seemed to be increasingly about leisure. I also began to discover more contemporary artists that were revisiting these themes: the painter Peter Doig and New Zealand based band The Clean were the main ones. This theme may figure more prominently in future works.

Color Fields

About a third of the way through the project, I decided to stop describing the space around my subjects and to place them within monochromatic color fields instead. I think there were two main motivations for this change. First, I wanted to simplify the images to make them as literal, up-front, and even as banal as possible. I thought this mirrored the format of the pop song more honestly. The pop song is an incredibly limited, simple format in which to work. I find this to be a strength; it forces you to be more imaginative and is typically much more immediate than other genres. The color fields were a way for me to operate within this same type of framework. Now, the relationships, actions, and compositions of the subjects became heightened and more obvious, which was what they needed in order to evoke the sensibility I sought.

Image-making

Likewise, I began to simplify my painting process. I was looking more at posters, album covers, and silk-screens, and I began to dwell less on the notion of being a painter's painter. I think this actually helped the painterly qualities of the work. By abandoning assumptions I'd held about struggle, the inherent meaning of mark-making, and the

sanctity of the picture plane, I could focus on making interesting images and let my hand do what it wanted more naturally. Ultimately, this may mean that I'm less of a painter than I thought, but as a result I'm beginning to find new inspirations from more diverse sources. For now at least, it feels more free.

Conclusion

I read somewhere that when Wayne Thiebaud started painting his cakes and pies, he thought he had come over the edge; beyond the point where anyone could actually take an interest in his work. He even thought that what he was doing was kind of bad; but he had a compulsion to keep doing it. In my own way, that's how I feel. In both painting and music, I feel like I'm beyond the point of any sense of objectivity. I find the paintings to be funny in the way very bad puns are funny, and I find the songs to be both frivolous and ominous; like the illustrations in coming-of-age novels for pre-teens. However, the compulsion to do both, and to continue to find their intersections, keeps growing. And that seems like a good sign. Hopefully, this discussion has given you a sense of how the various elements of *The Still Beat Came* to be seen and heard. I recommend listening to the album with headphones; cool looking headphones.

Vita

John Harlan Norris was born in Columbia, South Carolina, in 1978. He grew up in Nicholasville, Kentucky. In 2000, he graduated from Centre College with majors in studio art and English. He then moved to New York City where he worked as an administrator at Sotheby's Auction House and nurtured interests in music and painting. In 2002, he began attending Louisiana State University in pursuit of a Master of Fine Arts degree in drawing and painting. While there, he developed a body of paintings and recorded a self-produced pop album. Both were exhibited in his thesis exhibition entitled *The Still Beat*.