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PUNCH-DRUNK

Ian T. Carey

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My work is an attempt to synthesize painting and drawing strategies that traditionally have been used to promote political dissent. I am influenced by many artists: Jean Dubuffet, Leon Golub, Carroll Dunham, Jim Nutt and Karl Wirsum, whose work has informed my imagery and thinking in relationship to my artistic production. My thesis statement will define how I operate creatively and visually, and will seek to articulate a philosophy of my painting practice. I use different painterly vocabularies, manipulate figurative elements, discover through process, challenge standardized tastes, and use historic tropes to reveal a complex allegory. My paintings are sites where my worldview is enacted materially, through these applied visual strategies. However, this dynamic operates both ways—my material engagement also alters my worldview.

PUNCH-DRUNK

IAN T. CAREY

**A Thesis Supportive Statement Submitted in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of**

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

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2013

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PUNCH-DRUNK

IAN T. CAREY

THESIS SUPPORTIVE STATEMENT APPROVED:

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CHAPTER 1

PUNCH-DRUNK

My work is an attempt to synthesize painting and drawing strategies that traditionally have been used to promote political dissent. I am influenced by many artists: Jean Dubuffet, Leon Golub, Carroll Dunham, Jim Nutt and Karl Wirsum, whose work has informed my imagery and thinking in relationship to my artistic production. My thesis statement will define how I operate creatively and visually, and will seek to articulate a philosophy of my painting practice. I use different painterly vocabularies, manipulate figurative elements, discover through process, challenge standardized tastes, and use historic tropes to reveal a complex allegory. My paintings are sites where my worldview is enacted materially, through these applied visual strategies. However, this dynamic operates both ways—my material engagement also alters my worldview.

I combine aspects of abstraction and figuration in an effort to create imagery that represents my perspective on a confused and often troubled world. Each figure depicted has both unique and generalized characteristics that reveal their individual condition. The figures are conglomerations of isolated body parts and forms. The relationships between the figures exist much like the elements that comprise the body. The figures appear vague, twisted, and not clearly interpreted. The image matter is culled from the ether of art history, popular culture, Google image searches, and my personal interactions with people throughout the day.

Each image is composed awkwardly and out of proportion, which parallels the way I perceive things in my life. Each image presents narrative scenarios that are difficult to interpret allowing for participation within the poetics of the painting. This generates a shared experience between the viewer and myself, with no singular reading presented. The paintings allow the viewer to consider both the ambiguous narrative established by the image and the extended metaphor that is established by the painting activity. The material vocabulary of the paint contrasts with the figurative elements, increasing a visual tension that heightens both the expressive and psychological nature of the painting. The piecing together of these images parallels the way that I believe we navigate through our daily lives; the concept of a linear or singular experience is disregarded and rendered obsolete.

I feel that the activity of painting is a practice akin to thinking out loud. I work and rework each image until I feel satisfied with the end result, an image that externalizes my thought processes. The activity of painting helps me to process my interaction with an extremely complex and conflicting world. The visual language of my paintings embodies my perception of human activity within our current cultural frame. If the free use of gestural marks at one time suggested an internal struggle likened to the musicality of jazz, I believe the intermingling of a painterly visual dialogue with drawing elements now represents the dynamic attitude of what could be called punk rock. Punk may be defined as a cultural and societal critique represented through several similar historical movements offering an ever-fluid opposition to a perceived status quo. Punk offers a sporadic yet constant reminder of our need to reevaluate and challenge our political realities. It is the creative act (whether visual or sonic) that can aid in our development of an emotional range, informed by our cultural experience, constructing and informing our shared realities. I would like the viewer to enjoy an experience of self-discovery while navigating the image. This activity allows for the spectator to seek out a

psychological relationship to the distortion of the image, while reveling in the information provided.¹

THE MARK, PAINTERLY VOCABULARIES, AND THEIR ROLE IN MY WORK

The use of paint and the focus on the painterly mark are essential activities that further convey my worldview. I would like to create a connection with the viewer. The marks of my painting establish a tactile optical-space that indexes my physical interaction with the picture plane. The image becomes kinetic, slipping in between the senses—optical and haptic. The picture communicates through the materiality of the paint.² The use of mark making and the incorporation of various painterly vocabularies enable the viewer to traverse back and forth throughout the picture plane. The figures act as armatures that allow me to experiment with marks in order to reveal the narrative potential of each image. An unclear narrative is unveiled to the spectator through a myriad of different painting and drawing strategies, constructing an open-ended story that may be completed by the viewer. The painter Carroll Dunham has eloquently stated:

My armature has become these pictures of places and these characters. But I come to that just intuitively. It isn't a real narrative. It's a motif that becomes the armature for doing all these paintings and drawings. Narrative is a projection on to that. When you look at paintings you can run the narrative in your mind—forward, backwards, sideways. Things can be what you decide them to be; there is no user manual, no narrator, just pictures. Even though it is nameable, it is still very open as a story.³

Dunham's armature functions as an excuse to mark the picture plane with paint, which aligns with his abstracted sense of narrative. In Dunham's painting, *Mesokingdom Eleven (Coast)* (see figure 1), the figure is segmented from the landscape through the use of graphic line and is

¹ Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought* (New York-Cambridge University Press, 2001), 149.

² Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 102-103.

³ Carroll Dunham, interview by Matthew Ritchie, *Carroll Dunham Paintings*, ed. Tim Yohn (Ostfildren-Ruit, New Museum of Contemporary Art and Hatze Cantz Publishers, 2002), 91.

enveloped by a dynamic use of painted marks. The artist rubs, scratches and layers the paint, portraying an intense energy within his cartoon-like caricature. The marks denote an open-ended tenor, the scrapes and rubbings act as an insight to the figure's state of being. The exterior environment framed around the figure furthers the tensions that exist within the painting. The landscape is rhythmically abused, the paint pushed and drawn chaotically, yet loosely contained. The painting techniques are used to inform us of the cause of our character's plight.

I use similar visual strategies to Carroll Dunham and lead the viewer to his or her own conclusions. With the painting *St. Plume* (see figure 2), I have allowed the mark making to interact within the body of the figures, while setting up a background that envelops the figural elements. The mixture of impastos, lines, rubbing and scratches intertwine to reflect an unrestricted experience that allows the imagination to breath. I would like the paint, rather than the image matter, to do the real talking. I may guide the viewer in one direction or the other, but my goal is to create paintings that stimulate an internal dialogue within the viewer, a dialogue which intermingles with the experience of the painting. I engage the viewer in an active investigation of the central figure's predicament. The relevant narrative structure remains open to many interpretations. The viewer's engagement is shaped by my physical interaction with the materials displayed. The tragedy of the character can quickly slip into a humorous celebration of his state.

THE PERFECT HAND

I have always been drawn to images that could be considered less than attractive, emotionally off-putting, disconcerting and what some would call "not quite right." The awkwardness of the image generally displays one characteristic: a purposeful disregard of the

ideal human form, primarily evidenced through the distortion of the subject's anatomy. I find a home within painting traditions that break from ideas of overt realism and mimetic display. The breakdown of an idealized body can produce a visual tension that may force a willing viewer into the realm of empathetic contemplation.

One way this may be seen is in my treatment of the hand. I gather from a number of geographical and historical sources that endow the image of the hand with a particular physical charge. I am attracted to the hands represented within the powerful depictions of the crucifix by the early 16th century painter Matthias Grünewald. The hands are modeled to be large, tormented and soiled. Grünewald's contemporaries chose to create elegance and drama through the use of classical depictions of the body. Grünewald relied on the symbolic potential of the corpus. His image of Christ's body elongated the hands, which were stretched, pierced and tortured (see figure 3). I am interested in creating uncomfortable hands, hands that point to the evidence of physical pain. I want to draw and paint hands that hold on to the residues of life. I draw and paint photographed representations of my own hands placed in uncomfortable positions. I also view my actual hands while in similar positions when modeling the image. The perfect hand will reflect a history of the body and its relationship to an often confusing, violent, and disconnected world. If one is always seeking beauty, balance, serenity, and accepted aesthetic value, one misses the true stuff of life.

My paintings reflect a search for a more complex understanding of beauty and aesthetic worth. Maybe this type of beauty is less attractive and less accessible than we allow ourselves to perceive, yet we let it slip away from our attention. My work displays imagined realities that accept the peccadilloes of one's life, and reflects, even rejoices, in its discomfort. The cultural critic Ben Highmore questions traditional aesthetic values. He states,

What happens to fear, anger, disappointment, contentment, smell, touch, boredom, frustration, weariness, hope, itchiness, backache, trepidation, and the mass of hardly

articulated feelings and moods that saturate our social, sexual, political, and, private lives? And aren't these the elements (rather than beauty and the sublime) that fill most of our lives most of the time? ⁴

The depiction of our hands in a particular way can remind us of those sensations and more. In fact, due to the difficulty of writing about such matters, a visual experience can fill in the verbal void. If the eye is the window to the soul, the hand acts as an index, signaling to the body and its sensations. I establish a relationship with the viewer by emphasizing the physical experience of the characters that allows for the psychological projection of the viewer, a projection that will invite an empathetic response that hinges on the spectator's relationship to his or her own body. The hands that I draw and paint do not reflect a comfortable engagement with the world, but depict life's actualities and its wide range of experiences.

ALLEGORICAL POTENTIAL ACHIEVED THROUGH VISUAL TENSION AND HISTORICAL TROPISM

I purposefully interweave image matter and historical symbolism in order to create a visual tension. The tension created through the intermingling of incongruous source materials and visual vocabularies has the ability to transcend overt symbolism and lead the images into the realm of allegory. To support my argument I will compare and contrast my work with an iconic Marian image produced by the Sienese painter Duccio Di Buoninsegna titled *Madonna and Child with Six Angels, Ca. 1300*. (see figure 4). The figures within the small egg tempera painting are detailed and modeled with an extremely transparent material. The figures are completely separated from the ground. The opulent background constructed of gold leaf contains and pronounces the holy family. This symbolism transcended written language and presented the audience with the narrative of the most holy mother and child. The trope of the mother of God and the savior pushes the viewer into the painting's shimmering materiality. The

⁴ Ben Highmore, "Bitter After Taste," in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Siegworth (Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2010), 122.

costuming and posturing of the characters served to hold the attention of the viewer in an attempt to relate their gaze to their own familial relationships. The large baby (appearing much like a miniaturized middle-aged man) held and cradled, yet upright, engages the mother. The Christ child is intertwined with the Marian figure, and we run through the narrative using the facial expressions and anatomical relationship (elongated fingers pointing, the edge of arms leading) to work our attention toward the mother and then to the child. The bodily relationships manipulate and push our eyesight in one direction, shifting our attention, visually emphasizing the importance of the story, while interrelating the painting to our lived experience.

My painting *Mar-lan I* (see figure 5) has been influenced by the image of Madonna and child and the religious image serves as my catalyst for manipulating the painting and drawing elements that exist within it. It also assists in the role of expanding my ideas of how our human relationships can be manipulated and conceived. I have pushed the figural elements of my paintings in a parallel way to the Medieval depiction of the holy family. I have also incorporated contemporary imagery that is used to sell various products and that mimic the perceived historic and expressive importance of Mary and the Christ child. The soft edges of the collage elements aid the movement of the figures forward in relationship to a maximalist use of paint. This gross materiality constructs the background environment for the hybridized imagery, which exists between the realms of the odd, the familiar and maybe even the profane. The tensions that function within the painting are caused by the intermingling between the various visual vocabularies and the historic importance of the Christ child (also depicted as a middle aged man, shrunk down, but in diapers) and his mother. The very human experience of mother with child is then manipulated by the distortion of the image, the facial characteristics expressed, and the constant corruption of the figure-ground relationship. This back-and-forth relationship between

the materials prevents the viewer from settling on one aspect or position of the painting. These strategies allow for a mental back-and-forth that fuses a historic portrayal with our contemporary human relationships. The image is a visual open door allowing for the enjoyment of the materiality, the trope of motherly love, and the delineation of a curiosity caused by the subtle shifts of the vocabularies exhibited. The elements are joined together and sporadically ripped apart. Our relationship to the historic and the contemporary is questioned, suggesting a multivalent allegory that attempts to explain the inexplicable.

DISCOVERING THE WORK AS PROCESS

Material exploration is a key component within the development of my imagery. I make marks additively, subtractively, and experimentally. A discontent and restlessness that exists within my process creates an opportunity to make countless decisions that affect the overall image. The paintings are constrained by their geometric structure, yet the limitation of the picture frame provides an unlimited opportunity for me to move. It is essential for me to push the paint, hold back, and look, consider and then react. My process allows me to negotiate with the image. My original ideas are renegotiated and tested as I move the material around. Through this negotiation, ideas spring forward and move toward other visual solutions. The most succinct explanation of my painterly approach has been stated by the sociologist Richard Sennett in relationship to the production of music through the use of stringed instruments. He proclaims,

As a performer, at my fingertips, I experience error—error that I seek to correct. I have a standard for what should be, but my truthfulness resides in the simple recognition that I make mistakes. Sometimes in discussions of science this recognition is reduced to the cliché of ‘learning from one’s mistake.’ Musical technique shows that the matter is not so simple. I have to be willing to commit error, to play wrong notes, in order eventually to get them right.⁵

⁵ Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman* (London and New Haven, Yale University Press, 2008) 159-160.

My visual exploration of the image and material engagement with the paint serves to reflect on our current cultural conditions. This explorative process is bound by my search for a visual philosophy. This activity seeks to reflect that which defies our use of language, and to offer an opportunity for a newly discovered visual experience that does not exist within our normative visual lives. This negotiation unveils the possibility of a newly revealed reality.

TO CHALLENGE TASTE

My images seek to defy rules established by current cultural tastes. I would like to challenge the standards placed within an art world that proclaims openness to all visual exploration, yet controls artistic production through cultural and academic institutions. The high-mindedness of our current pluralism is all but silenced by the marketplace and a lack of public funding. I believe that taste is used as yet another control. Ben Highmore believes that,

Taste is an orchestration of the sensible, a way of ordering and demeaning, of giving value and taking it away. On the one hand it seems to occupy a thin level of culture (the preoccupation of snobs, gourmards, and the like); on another it will seem as the very basis of culture, not simply its system of value but the way that a set of values get under the skin and into our bones.⁶

Highmore argues that the use of taste is a key element of social manipulation. Our standards of cultural tastes set aesthetic limitations and in turn devalue and delegitimize forms of creativity that do not interact within the culturally constructed systems in which we live. Broadly speaking, any limitation on creative output siphons out ideas that are unable to participate within greater society.

My work attempts to walk a tightrope between “acceptable taste” and historical tropes. The paintings rely on my idiosyncratic view of what makes an image interesting. My images are made not to satisfy a sub-cultural agenda that exists among a minute section of the population.

⁶ Highmore, *The Affect Theory Reader*, 126.

They attempt to relate to as many people as possible. I would like to attract both the plumbers and the connoisseurs of this world. An aesthetic regulation works to both feed a rarified market, as well as to sustain the viability of various cultural positions held by other artists and academics alike. Current social aesthetic standards also fuel my desire to react against them. The act of painting unlocks my imaginative abilities: rules, restrictions and direct identification with a limited artistic history only shut down the potential of what I believe an image can be. Painting is a form of resistance: an activity that is currently culturally subordinated from within and without the artistic community.⁷ In my opinion any and all creative activities have become radically political. All objects that attempt to challenge taste and revolutionize our conceptions of taste can slip into subversion. A painting is a subtle cultural force that when noticed and addressed can aid in the propagation of thought. This cultural force can open the intellectual possibilities of all that interact within the visual experience. My paintings are the result of an attempt to democratize the image within a completely undemocratic system.

IN CONCLUSION- PAINTING A QUIXOTIC APPROACH

I in no way suffer from the delusions of creating an entirely new type of art, but I do have hope that my images can affect a willing audience. The cultural theorist Lawrence Grossberg has addressed the concept of hope within an academic pursuit,

Because in the end, I still want to figure out what is going on. And I believe that giving the best answer that one can, without simplification or reduction, even if it means giving up your favorite theoretical or political assumptions, is the responsibility of the intellectual and the most important contribution that the intellectual can make to the

⁷ My argument relies on my observation of a perceived value that exists only within a restricted academic argument that may or may not be in vogue at any one time, as well as our society's insistence on the monetary and/or market value of a creative work, rather than its cultural importance as a communicative device.

imagination and actualization of the virtual future. That is, to realizing that 'another world is possible.' That is the context that hope works for me.⁸

Grossberg's hope is for a greater understanding of culture through an academic pursuit. It is the possibility of found knowledge that has the opportunity to change culture, society and our political realities. I visualize his hope as chipping away at the currently invisible social constructions, while planting the intellectual seeds of change.

I have a similar belief about the act of image making: one paints and strives to produce a visual philosophy that feeds into the greater culture and aids in the re-evaluation of one's position in life. Painting is my attempt to implement a critical cultural analysis within the form of an image. Hope can lay the groundwork for a thoughtful deconstruction of one's surroundings, social circumstance and physical environment. Through a quixotic approach to the formation of an image, I strive to make paintings that hold within them the possibility of informing and shaping both my and the viewer's political and cultural views. It is this hope that fuels my desire to make images, and keeps me moving along a creative path.

⁸ Lawrence Grossberg, in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010) 338.



Figure 1. Carroll Dunham, *Mesokingdom Eleven (Coast)*. 2002, Oil on Linen, 69in. x 72in. Metro Picture, New York, New York. Available from ARTstor, <http://www.artstor.org>.



Figure 2. Ian T. Carey, *St. Plume*. 2013, Mixed media on panel, 48inches x 38inches.

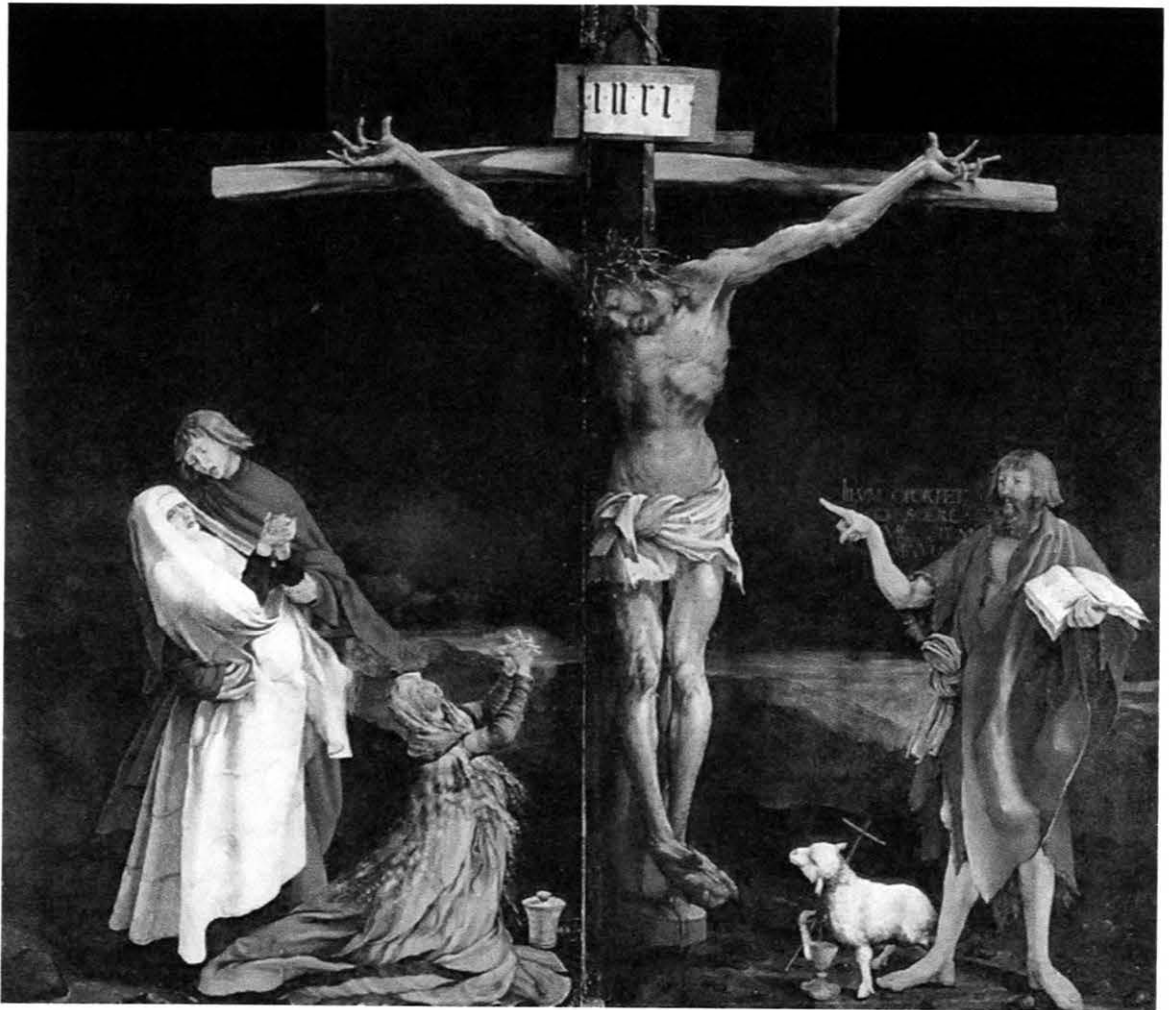


Figure 3. Matthias Grünewald, *Isenheim Altarpiece; Crucifixion*. 1512-1515, Middle Panel, Musée d'Unterlinden, Colmar, France. Available from ARTstor, <http://www.artstor.org>.



Figure 4. Duccio Di Buoninsegna, *Madonna and Child with Six Angels*. Tempera and gold leaf on panel, Ca. 1300-1305, Galleria Nazionale dell'Umbria. Available from: ARTstor, <http://www.artstor.org>



Figure 5. Ian T. Carey, *Mar-Ian I.* 2013, Mixed media on panel, 48 inches x 36 inches.

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APPENDIX

IMAGE LIST OF THESIS EXHIBITION ARTWORKS

1. *The Cockshire-choir*, 2012, Mixed media on panel, 92 inches x 78 inches.
2. *Punk Rock Mary and the Baby*, 2012, Mixed media on panel, 72 inches x 48 inches.
3. *Mr. Livetight*, 2012, Mixed media on panel, 36 inches x 24 inches.
4. *St. Plume*, 2013, Mixed media on panel, 48 inches x 36 inches.
5. *Mar-lan I*, 2013, Mixed media on panel, 48 inches x 36 inches.
6. *Mar-lan II*, 2013, Mixed media on panel, 48 inches x 36 inches.