



Story line

by Matthew Stuart Sontheimer

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts  
Montana State University

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Abstract:

I come from a family of great story tellers. As a result, when I think of family members, it is not of their physical characteristics but of the stories that are told by them and about them. This series of sculptures and drawings are portraits in which the characteristics of the persons represented are constructed out of events in their lives, rather than from their physical attributes. These works recount both my earliest and most recent memories.

I begin each sculpture by creating a symbol intended to represent a family member. This symbol is derived from a long process of researching the subject's background (place of birth, important experiences, etc.). This information is condensed into a form, often a common object, which I feel fully summarizes the life of the subject. In a sense, the created symbol is like an advertising logo for the subject, an icon that gives the viewer a visual depiction of the essence of the subject. Advertising logos have in fact influenced my approach to the extent that some of the symbols used are adaptations from actual logos. For example, the eyes on the piece "Myra" are taken from the CBS television logo. Once the symbol is realized, I construct it into an object. The surface of this object is then covered with a language of other symbols and patterns which both elaborate and further describe the story of this person. The patterns on the sculptures act both as a visual ground to hold the symbols in place and as a descriptive backdrop. The descriptive function of the pattern is one which reiterates the theme of the piece, or one which describes a more specific aspect of the subject. For example, the pattern of cascading lines on the sculpture, "Myra" form the name Myra written over and over again.

These lines are fragmented into shapes which represent droplets of water, and these in turn, relate to the overall form of the sculpture, a watering can. In "House of Fire" a work about my paternal grandfather, a maze-like pattern on one side of the work surrounds icons depicting significant concerns of his. The framework connecting these symbols represents the ambivalence that my grandfather brought into the events of his life.

The drawings are both research tools for the sculptures and depictions of specific events which I shared with a family member. As opposed to writing down a memory, I use the images to draw out a memory, creating a language similar to that in my sculptures. The events depicted represent a particular time period, and for this reason I chose a number of different symbols to depict the same person. In "A Conversation with My Father" I portray myself with a variety of symbols representing places where I have lived at different times in my life. The patterns and symbols in this drawing are derived from the telephone numbers of specific locations from which I have telephoned my father. The medium of my drawings is blue ballpoint pen on graph paper. I use the ballpoint pen because it is the instrument I associate with my own handwritten messages and letters. I also use it because of its general association as a medium of writing rather than one of drawing. I use graph paper both as a tool to map out the compositions of the drawings and as a psychological enhancer of my drawing process. I find the physical act of drawing with ballpoint pen to be more like sewing than drawing, and I approach the grid of the paper like a needlepoint canvas rather than a drawing surface. Each drawing is completed when the entire page has been covered with information. The compulsive landscape existing on the page is

my attempt to recapture an event in its entirety and, on a more personal level, it is a depiction of my persona.

The images in this series are influenced by a variety of sources. In addition to advertising logos, my influences include comics (for narrative compositions), African sculpture (for its use of symbolic and narrative form) and more specifically the works of Shiko Munakata and Adlof Wolfli. Munakata's wood block prints, in which forms interact with fields of complex patterning, have influenced the compositions and processes of both my sculpture and drawings. The enigmatic language and forms in Wolfli's drawings have inspired my own exploration in creating a language of personal symbols and patterns. The works of both these artists share the qualities of intimacy, inventiveness and psychological intensity that I strive for in my own work.

This body of work is greatly in debt to my grandfathers, both of whom left a great deal of experience and oral history that will provide a lifetime of visual imagery for my work. The pieces are not only a retelling of family stories, but also a personal attempt to create a new language with which to tell these stories. I do not expect the viewer to be able to decipher specific biographical references in my works, but rather experience the emotional content of the symbols, images, and patterns I have created.

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**A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree**

of

**Master of Fine Arts**

**MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY  
Bozeman, Montana**

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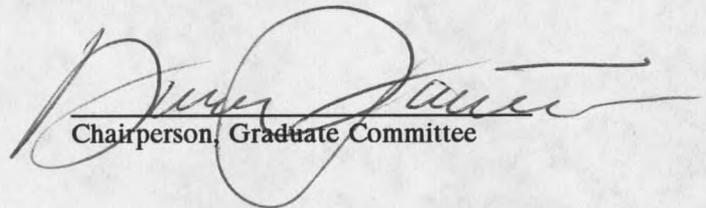
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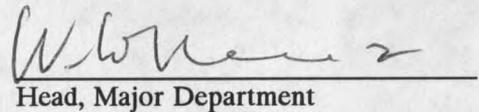
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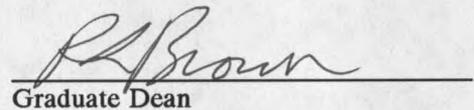
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## ARTIST'S STATEMENT

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## LIST OF SLIDES

1. Installation in gallery
2. Installation in gallery
3. Installation in gallery
4. "Benjamin," latex paint, ballpoint pen, rice paper, on wood, 16" x 12" 12 1/2", 1995
5. "House of Fire," ink and colored pencil on wood, 5" x 2" x 3/4, 1995
6. "House of Fire," back view
7. "MBJOSSM," colored pencil on wood, 7" x 7" x 1", 1995
8. "MBJOSSM," back view
9. "Study for Myra #1," oil and acrylic paint on wood, 6" x 6" x 1/2", 1995
10. "Myra," red iron oxide on wood, 16" x 17" x 9", 1995
11. "Lou," acrylic paint on wood, 9 1/2" x 6 x 1, 1995
12. "Close Distance," ink and ballpoint pen on wood, 11 1/2" x 9" x 3", 1995
13. "A Conversation With My Father," ballpoint pen on graph paper, 8 1/2" x 11", 1995
14. "Study for Myra #2," ballpoint pen on graph paper, 8 1/2" x 11", 1995
15. "Col. Osaki's Rope Test," ballpoint pen on graph paper, 8 1/2 x 11", 1995
16. "Nashville Avenue," ballpoint pen on graph paper, 8 1/2" x 11", 1995
17. "J.M.," ballpoint pen on graph paper, 8 1/2" x 11", 1995
18. "Jonas," ballpoint pen on graph paper, 8 1/2" x 11", 1995
19. "Noah," ballpoint pen on graph paper, 8 1/2" x 11", 1995
20. "Joseph," ballpoint pen on graph paper, 8 1/2" x 11", 1995

Installation

1



Installation

2



Installation

3



Benjamin

4



House of Fire

5



House of Fire (Back view)

6



MBJOSM

7



MBJOSM (Back view)

8



Study for Myra #1

9



12

OCT 21 1994

Myra

10



8

FEB 13 1995

LOU

11



Close Distance

12



A conversation with my father

13



Study for Myra #2

14



Col. OSAKI's Rope Test

15



Nashville Avenue

16



35

FEB 22 1995

J.M

17



Jonas

18



NOAH

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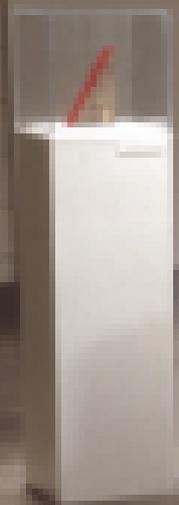
Joseph

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