

NAVIGATING IN THE SYNTHETIC VOID:

A HARDBOILED INVESTIGATION

by

Thomas John Pomarico

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DEDICATION

This paper is dedicated to my Mother and Father.

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ABSTRACT

Society is in the midst of a rapid and drastic shift of ontological perception. Technological advancements in connectivity have altered the rhythm and scale of life due to media saturation, social media, and surveillance. The success of these viral technologies has many obvious benefits; however, they also harbor malicious tendencies when left unchecked. Prescience visions of dystopia by authors George Orwell, Aldous Huxley and David Foster Wallace, once seemingly outlandish, have now become apparent. Shosana Zuboff's *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* published in 2018 would have read as science fiction 25 years ago. As a temporary panacea to the pace of technological engagement, I offer the creative process as a way to alter duration. Using 1940s and 1950s film noir as a metaphor for the environment and challenges of the modern artist. Through this examination a code of conduct emerges to navigate the disruptive pitfalls of media addiction. Construction of the art object involves a multistep conceptual and physical practice guiding behavior away from excessive technological encroachment. My research paper aims to elucidate this process and its potential benefits to an outside observer.

CHAPTER ONE

ACCELERATING INTO DYSTOPIA

A Historical Disruption

“A man of the classical age who had to live in medieval times would suffocate miserable just as a savage does in the midst of our civilization. Now there are times when a whole generation is caught in this way between two ages, two modes of life, with the consequence that it loses all power to understand itself and has no standard, no security, no acquiescence.”

-Herman Hesse, *Steppenwolf*

Over the last 100 years, society has been in the midst of an unprecedented ontological shift in the patterns, rhythms, and scale of experience. The magnitude and velocity of this shift has increased exponentially over the last 25 years. Reorientations related to innovations of connectivity have compressed cerebral and physiological space into an accessible global community. Perceptions have shifted through electronically mediated connectivity; my investigation is concerned not with the triumphant aspects of our new and accelerant technologies, but with the inconspicuous effects that penetrate society gradually, warping our daily life and altering our experience of reality in new challenging ways. My research aims to contemplate these effects through media representation in the hope of delineating a code of conduct to navigate this emergent sphere.

Disruptions in the historically consistent life-pace began well before I was born in 1988. However, my generation is part of a unique segment of time, having lived through the rise of the internet, the smartphone, and the invention of social media. The rate of internet consumption since its public introduction in the 1990s has been unprecedented,

exponential. Only 15 years after the introduction of the iPhone, it now boasts almost 4 billion users. Facebook launched the social media revolution in 2004, less than 20 years later, just under half of the planet's population actively use at least one social media platform. The internet connectivity has many uses; some applications have become ubiquitous to the point of invisibility. As a possible alternative to the new normality of technology addiction, I offer a hard-fought code of conduct centered around creative focus, using the example of constructing a surface and painting an image. The act of painting may too be bolstered by a technological mediation; however, at the very least it allows a pocket to form where one can unplug briefly and engage with direct physical materiality.

Unreliable Narrator

"But I was going into Tosche Station to pick up some power converters."

-Luke Skywalker, *Star Wars: A New Hope*

"Tatooine (/ˌtætuˈiːn/) is a fictional desert planet that appears in the Star Wars franchise. It is a beige-colored, desolate world orbiting a pair of binary stars, and inhabited by human settlers and a variety of other life forms."

-Wikipedia

In 2005 I was a Junior in high school. During a weekly computer class, I received a text on my flip phone from my best buddy Michael, informing me to research the Star Wars planet

Tatooine¹ on a website called Wikipedia. I had not heard of Wikipedia. I wondered, “is this some sort of Star Wars encyclopedia?” I tried to remember if there was an alien species in Star Wars called a Wiki. When I initially searched the Wikipedia page for Tatooine, I was dazzled by the breadth of knowledge. The page contained descriptions of the geography, a catalog of all its known species (flora and fauna), notable settlements and a generous array of photographs. The original Star Wars trilogy does a marvelous job hinting at a wider universe, just enough to pique curiosity about strange places and creatures briefly encountered by the main characters. Reading the encyclopedia entry of Tatooine was exhilarating. However, I found myself more intrigued by the expansive collection of integrated and hyperlinked definitions. I made lateral movements to Obi-Wan Kenobi and Darth Vader before discovering this website covered much more than Star Wars.

Over the years, I have spent countless hours consuming information on Wikipedia. I have at times found it addictive and deeply entertaining. Initially, I refused to believe criticism about the veracity of information on the site and would irritably reply ‘everything has to be sourced!’ In 2019, a CBS expose focused on Steve Pruitt, a 35-year-old man living in his parent’s basement who has edited $\frac{1}{3}$ of all Wikipedia pages. Although I do not wish to diminish Pruitt’s tremendous accomplishment, this revelation was somewhat disillusioning, realizing one man had such a huge impact on this vast global encyclopedia. In March 2021, Meghan McDonough reported on a campaign created by women editors designed to address Wikipedia's

¹ Tatooine is the home planet of the original Star Wars trilogy's main character Luke Skywalker. It first appeared in the original 1977 film.

gender gap. There currently exists approximately four times as many articles on men as women (a cause that Mr. Pruitt has worked hard to help close). Additionally, even many of the news sources cited by contributors to Wikipedia are geared toward entertainment, rather than fact. Inherently, this begs the question whether or not it is possible to decipher reality from media representation.

As the digital world increasingly expands, the physical world is reduced to armature for cyberspace. Those left outside of connectivity are obsolete detritus, unable to understand the complex sequence of signs reliant on other signs pervasive in the collective consciousness. Social reality is largely opaque and incoherent apart from the electronic media stream. During high school, my friends and I would have entire conversations collaged from movie quotations. When I see those old friends now, we often still evoke these movie quotations to laughter, however I feel much more ambivalent about this progress of citation, my humor and nostalgia become invariably suffused with uncertainty about the reality of meaningful exchange between people.

The Postmodern Simulacra

“The spectacle cannot be understood as a mere visual excess produced by mass media technologies. It is a worldview that has actually been materialized, a view of a world that has become objective.”

-Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*

In the last 50 years, much of Western academic philosophical theory centering on the effects of accelerant technology falls under the category of 'Postmodern.' Postmodern is an expansive and often confusing term. At its heart, it is used to delineate 'that which is after modernity,' but it has come to be synonymous with meaninglessness, deconstructionism, the ironic, the absurd, and the questioning of objective reality. Postmodernism is now represented by various schools of thought. In a postmodern worldview, a contemporary observation of grand narratives or meta-narratives of the past are insufficient to describe the nature of reality, but they can be recycled as a framework amongst many used to govern social, political or economic behavior (Powell). Areas of the world exposed to prolonged capitalism tend to transition into post-industrial service centered economies. In this state, production of objects with a 'use-value' and 'exchange-value' as defined by Marx, are no longer the impetus that drives society. 'Sign-value' has become the primary motivation, emphasizing consumption over production. Sign-value functions to display prestige, rank or social standing and exists to perpetuate its life cycle; signs point to other signs in an endless consumptive vortex (Powell, 46). In other words, processes of consumption operate through an ever-expanding vain with each purchase presumably further testament to one's identity. If you buy a Tesla vehicle, you must also buy property in Southern California, an Apple iPhone 17, a pixelated Kevin Durant NFT digital trading card, Organic Russian red kale from Whole Foods, etc., etc. The postmodern citizen's grasp for identity and intensive consumption is a primary symptom leading to feelings of emptiness; a magnetic void constructed of the synthetic.

One such postmodern thinker, Jean Baudrillard, theorizes that reality is indecipherable from simulation, bringing us into what is called the hyperreal in his 1981 text *Simulacra and*

Simulation. “It is useless to dream of a revelation through content, useless to dream of a revelation through form, because the medium and real are now in a single nebula whose truth is indecipherable” (Baudrillard, 83). Baudrillard outlines the orders of simulation as such:

1. It is the reflection of a profound reality; in this case the image is a good appearance - representation is of the sacramental order.
2. It masks and denatures a profound reality; in this case it is an evil appearance of the order of maleficence. Signs and images do not faithfully reveal reality to us but can hint at the existence of an obscure reality which the sign itself is incapable of encapsulating (Kang).
3. It masks the absence of a profound reality; in this case it plays at being an appearance - the order of sorcery. Signs and images claim to represent something real, but no representation is taking place and arbitrary images are merely suggested as things which they have no relationship to (Kang).
4. It has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum; in this case it is no longer of the order of appearances, but of simulation. This is a regime of total equivalency, where cultural products need no longer even pretend to be real in a naïve sense, because the experiences of consumers’ lives are so predominantly artificial that even

claims to reality are expected to be phrased in artificial, “hyperreal” terms. Any naïve pretension to reality as such is perceived as bereft of critical self-awareness, and thus as over sentimental (Kang).

Baudrillard calls this final phase, “the transition from signs which dissimulate something to signs which dissimulate that there is nothing, marks the decisive turning point” (Baudrillard, 6). The airless atmosphere has asphyxiated the referent, leaving us satellites in aimless orbit around an empty center. We breathe an ether of floating images that no longer bear a relation to any reality whatsoever (Massumi). In this reality images are interchangeable and bleed together, signs only point to other signs and have no external model. Any term is interchangeable with any other term therefore meaning is elusive and indeterminate. I’m left wondering if all my thoughts and actions are imitations of media representation, subliminally informing me how to act, how to think, and how to feel. If the individual is nothing but the intersecting lines of facsimile, what does that imply for day-to-day practical living? I have since wondered if any kind of social or political change is really possible, conjuring up thoughts of the dystopian mantra $2 + 2 = 5$, an ode to the flexibility of reality as social construction. As an artist I’m concerned with the possibility of creating anything significant outside of fatuous busy-work for simple therapeutic value that will ultimately leave me a burdensome product. I ponder the fault lines of a dystopian reality with these questions; I think about them daily.

Dystopian Visions

“Your worst enemy, he reflected, was your nervous system. At any moment the tension inside you was liable to translate itself into some visible symptom.”

-George Orwell, *1984*

“A gram is better than a damn.”

-Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*

The two most popular visions of a dystopian society are George Orwell’s *1984* and Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*. Neil Postman, a late 20th century philosopher and sociologist wrote *Amusing Ourselves to Death* in 1985. This book is a study in what Postman considered to be the beginning of a dystopian society gaining momentum due to ubiquitous technology infestation (mainly TV). He begins the book with a comparison between the dystopian visions of *1984* and *Brave New World*. When Postman was writing in 1985, he argued that Huxley’s vision and not Orwell had come to realization, “no big brother is required to deprive people of their autonomy, maturity and history ... people will come to love their oppression, to adore the technologies that undo their capacities to think” (Postman, vii). Orwell feared that information would be controlled and limited. Huxley feared that information would be overloaded, reduced to irrelevance, its viewers exhausted and passive. It appears that both Postman, Orwell and Huxley have relevance in the world’s current state. Both *1984* and *Brave New World* have become reality, depending on the area of the world you live in and the level of technological advancement available.

Orwell's most terrifying themes are oppressive surveillance and violence to enforce the socially constructed reality. One of the most memorable terms from *1984* is 'thoughtcrime', which implies that the level of surveillance is so tight that even the presence of an unorthodox thought can be detected and punished by the 'thoughtpolice'. Omnipresent surveillance in China is not far from Orwell's 'thoughtcrime' surveillance. Chinese Government surveillance has caused an explosion of individualized as well as mass data collection. To utilize this data, the government's 'social credit' system has coalesced, "in order to improve citizens' behavior ... individuals and enterprises are to be scored on various aspects of their conduct ... where you go, what you buy and who you know" (Zuboff, 388). This information is fed to government records and private businesses (with little boundary separating the two). Punishments and rewards for 'good' and 'bad' behaviors are based on a variety of social and financial activities. Intimidation through violence is a core principle of Orwell's vision. It's easy to imagine how quickly China's situation can turn to violence. During the 2020 pandemic quarantine, rumors out of China suggest excessive physical violence to enforce lockdown regulations. The hijacking of cell phone GPS data for Covid contact tracing has already occurred in many countries notably Israel (Tizmuki). Any government, "authoritarian" or otherwise, could leverage Covid protection as a means for the justification of violence.

Orwell warned us of the dangers of propaganda and information control. In *1984*, the world evolved into three superstates Oceania, Eurasia, and Eastasia. The reader's perspective in *1984* is from Oceania, who is at war with the other two superstates. Over the course of the novel the reader never interacts with this war firsthand; news reports are the only source of its ambient presence. After the reader is exposed to the oppression of Oceania's government, it is unclear if

a war outside of ‘airstrip 1’ (Great Britain) is actually happening or if Eurasia and Eastasia even exist at all.

American trust in the government is at an all-time statistical low. According to Pew Research Center, only 20% of Americans trust the government to ‘do the right thing’. Even though the government is perceived as untrustworthy, few Americans understand the profundity of the United States’ propaganda machine, as outlined in Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman’s 1988 book *Manufacturing Consent*. This book described five editorially distorting filters² of the mass media. Similar to the war with Eurasia and Eastasia in 1984, Chomsky and Herman outline ‘communist threats’ as the mechanism to leverage social control during the cold war era. The United States in contrast is purported to be the world's largest exporter of ‘democracy’.

In recent news (March 2022) the Russian invasion of Ukraine has been covered around the clock by the American news media machine. One of the commonly reoccurring stories is Putin’s restraint of information flow aimed at controlling the narrative reaching his citizens. Putin is likely controlling the narrative to the best of his ability, but it is important to note that America has more effectively controlled the narrative. A good example from *Manufacturing Consent* is the analysis of the Indochina wars of the 1960-70s. In Cambodia from

² 1) Ownership: of mass media conglomerates are profit based and therefore seek the mass audience of viewers, listeners and readers. 2) Advertising: the majority of revenue is derived from advertising forcing media outlets to consider the economic and political slant of advertising corporations. 3) Sourcing: private and governmental bureaucracies of power limit new sourcing if they are portrayed in an unsatisfactory light ultimately hurting the media corporation financially. 4) Flack: the blowback from a potentially inflammatory direction can cause significant stress from legal or public image defense 5) Fear: A boogie man word that serves to direct the general flow of news. This has “evolved” to amorphous threats of “terrorism”, with a valence that has shifted from so-called “Islamic” terrorism, to the threat of proto-fascist right-wing militias and most recently Covid paranoia.

1969 to 1975, “U.S bombing at a historically unprecedented level and a civil war sustained by the United States left the country in utter ruins” (Chomsky & Herman, 260). Casualty estimates are 600,000 dead and 2 million refugees. At this time, little to no reporting was done on this private C.I.A. war. When the onslaught ended, a brutal civil war instigated by the U.S. gave rise to the Khmer Rouge, led by Pol Pot, who was responsible for the death of another million. Pol Pot was eventually condemned by the U.S. news media and compared to Hitler and Stalin. Again, the U.S. media never mentioned the U.S. bombings during the secret war period or the involvement of the U. S. in Pol Pot’s rise to power.

The propaganda machines the United States, Russia, and other superpower countries can display the characteristics of an Orwellian nightmare. The technology of the last 25 years has fractionalized and personalized propaganda machines. There are numerous options for a national narrative because of advancements in and ease of content dispersal. United States news sources often micro-target certain areas of the country ‘othering’ these regions the way a foreign communist country would have been ‘othered’ in the 1960s; an example would be Fox News’ treatment of California. Another important facet of contemporary news media is the narrative sabotage from podcasters like Joe Rogan. Rogan has an average audience of 11 million listeners, more than NBC, CBS, ABC, and FOX primetime shows combined. He can sway the opinion of large masses with the guests and topics he chooses to cover. In a recent incident he brought on guest Dr. Robert Malone³ to talk about Covid vaccines sparking a campaign of media blowback citing misinformation. However, Joe Rogan is considered ‘entertainment’ opposed to ‘news’

³ This podcast reached 11 million listeners, only the Superbowl got higher ratings.

which brings me into the reason why I consider Postman and Huxley to be slightly more accurate in their version of Dystopia.

The means of control in Huxley's *Brave New World* is infant bioengineering and Soma, an antidepressant which always makes the user feel 'happy', a near constant state of hallucinatory bliss. While bioengineering infants in test tubes has yet to reach mass production, a form of Soma has. In *Brave New World* when characters feel a negative emotion, they take a dose. In 1985, Neal Postman latched onto Huxley's idea of unending happiness when the largely uncriticized consequences of an entertainment-based society had yet to be explored. In *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Neil Postman argues that the news began to take on many more of the characteristics of entertainment. Meanwhile, factual reporting was subverted in favor of the sensational and the spectacular, making for better ratings and more exposure for advertising campaigns. Postman argues, "the average shot length is 3.5 seconds, so the eye never rests, always has something new to see...television offers viewers a variety of subject matter, requires minimal skills to comprehend and is largely aimed at emotional gratification" (Postman, 86). Even the commercials on television are exquisitely crafted to appeal to our most primal desires; entertainment is the main purpose of cable television. In consumer culture we have come to expect that anything fed to us on a screen is for amusement and pleasure, and if it isn't appealing in such a way it is viscerally rejected. The expectation is that we are always entitled to be entertained.

Not only do we expect constant entertainment, we are pacified by it: Rogan, Seinfeld, Indiana Jones, Les Holt, and racy distractions on Instagram all jostle for our attention. Enough content exposure and the images become equally compressed into a scroll of irrelevance. The

proliferation of entertainment addiction has evolved rapidly over the last seventy years. I don't think that Huxley envisioned soma to come in the form of smartphone addiction or YouTube algorithms, but it shares striking similarities to these media. Spurred on by the entanglement of capitalism and technology, entertainment has penetrated into our nervous systems, commandeering us biologically and forging a firm interdependency.

The Physics of Media Addiction

“The major advances in civilization are processes that all but wreck the societies in which they occur.”

-A.N. Whitehead

The 20th century philosopher and sociologist Marshall McLuhan used the word 'medium' and 'technology' interchangeably. He defines the medium as “any extension of ourselves,” the car is an extension of our legs, the telescope an extension of our vision and the phone an extension of our voice. McLuhan's most famous phrase 'the medium is the message' is often understood as: the medium we receive content through is more important than the content itself; the effects of how we consume news via a TV are more important than the facts of the news. This phrase is often mistakenly interpreted to mean that the medium of television is more important than the news of the 9/11 attacks. What McLuhan actually wanted to emphasize was the unpredictable effects of a viral medium. While the written word is an extension of our thoughts, the advent of electronic mediums is an extension of our nervous systems. McLuhan says the 'message' of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern it introduces into human affairs.

McLuhan outlines two different types of media: hot and cold. A hot form of media usually involves only one sense and gives enough data to close a loop. An example of this would be a high-definition photograph of a landscape; what one needs to know is right in front of you and it only engages your vision. A cold media engages more than one sense and is fragmented in a way that the viewer needs to close the loop; one example would be video games, because they involve the senses of touch, sight and sound and it requires participation from the user. These definitions of hot and cold media are not perfect and often shift based on what they are being compared with. The medium of cable television from the 1990s involved more than one sense, yet it was still largely a one-way street. I would consider it a hot media because the viewer was a passive consumer. A lot of internet media is consumed as a 'hot' one-way street, such as YouTube, social media (Instagram, Facebook, Twitter) and Wikipedia. However, all of the mediums can equally function as 'cold' media, that is highly interactive and multisensory engaging. Users alternate between consumer and producer, "...mass postproduction in an age of crowd creativity. Today, almost everyone is an artist. We are pitching, phishing, spamming, chain-liking or mansplaining" (Steyerl, 150). The interactivity of internet platforms engages users in a different dimension, as opposed to Cable TV. The perceived presence of a real or imagined audience 'out there' promotes a psychological participation beyond the cool medium of television. Big technology companies like Google, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, Tik Tok, etc., are aware of the compulsive engagement associated with their products and they compete for undivided attention. Internet activity is surveilled closely, recording our involvement through the surplus data stream we leave behind.

Fifty-two percent of the world's population are mobile internet users. Barring some global catastrophe trends show that, these numbers will increase exponentially. As a child, I can remember life before the rise of the internet and social media. Anyone at least 30 years old witnessed the increasingly pervasive integration of technology into every aspect of daily life. There are many clear benefits to this increasingly digitized world: data organization, long distance social connectivity, logistics of goods and services, synchronization, and platforms to disperse content. As we rapidly move into cyberspace, some of the consequences are not immediately apparent. Implicit in McLuhan's claim that electronic devices act as an extension of our central nervous system, is the argument that the arrival of the internet and the mass dispersal of mobile devices would cause a significant impact on human behavior and brain function. Scientific research is slowly emerging to validate this theory.

Shoshana Zuboff in her 2019 book *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, argues that the collection and analysis of behavioral surplus data is this generation's great resource exploitation. In roughly the last 150 years, the natural world has been significantly impacted by industrial capitalists due to deforestation, damming, extraction, agriculture, pollution, ocean depletion, etc. Zuboff argues that an equal amount of exploitation is happening at an alarming rate through human participation in internet usage. Instead of altering the natural landscape, this exploitation is altering the human psyche. The eventual goal of this operation is an automated capitalist system. Google CEO Larry Page is quoted saying, "our ultimate ambition is to transform the overall Google experience making it beautifully simple, almost 'automagical' because we understand what you want and can deliver it instantly" (Zuboff, 128). If enough of your behavioral data is analyzed, services can be improved to the point of near predictable

certainty. A byproduct of this process is behavior modification for further participation in the endless feedback loop. The equation works like this: users interact with platforms, behavioral data is collected through surveillance so analytics can be performed, which in turn “improves” services, which in turn increases user participation. “Once extracted, it is rendered as behavioral data, producing a surplus that forms the basis of a wholly new class of market exchange” (Zuboff, 99). Therefore, the most valuable resource in the attention economy is the pattern and rhythm of user behavior under omnipresent surveillance.

Many big tech companies ignored the premise that this business model could be considered immoral, and instead opted to create a service resembling the addictive qualities of a slot machine mentality. The 2018 book, *The Molecule of More*, by Daniel Z. Lieberman and Michael Long describe the way dopamine functions in the brain. Dopamine is a chemical produced in the ventral tegmental, an evolutionarily ancient part of the brain, which activates when possibilities are identified in a situation (L&L, 29). The Dopamine “circuits” evolved to prioritize behavior that leads to survival and reproduction, manifesting as urges for nourishment, sex and competition. Dopamine releases stimulate the imagination, triggering energy, enthusiasm and hope; repeated hits are extremely addictive. The reason why slot machines, video games, and social media applications are effective is because they tap directly into thousands of years of slowly evolved brain chemistry. “Every feature of a slot machine - its mathematical structure, visual graphics, sound dynamics, seating and screen ergonomics - is calibrated to increase a gambler’s ‘time on the device’ and to encourage ‘play to extinction’” (Zuboff, 450).

From this highly calculated application, the player can enter what is called, by Harvard Medical School addiction researcher Howard Shaffer, the ‘Machine Zone,’ a state of self-forgetting in which one is carried along by an irresistible momentum feeling like one is being played by the machine (Zuboff, 450). Facebook has adapted this strategy calling their design principles - engrossing, immersive, and immediate. Sean Parker the former president of Facebook admitted that the application was designed to consume the maximum possible amount of users’ time and consciousness. “The idea was to send you a little dopamine hit every once in a while, for variable reinforcement in the form of ‘likes’ and comments ... while leaving a stream of raw material in their wake” (Zuboff, 451). The strategy has been effective for promoting user engagement. In 2016, data gathered by Facebook showed that the average pre-millennial adult checks their phone 30 times a day, the average millennial checks their phone an average of 157 times a day, and generation Z far exceeds this pace. Younger people report being online almost constantly and shift between four or more media applications at a time.

The implications of this research can be disturbing, especially for those of us old enough to remember the transition into the internet-based society. As generations born into the connected world mature, many of these accelerating symptomatic tendencies may seem totally commonplace. There are few laws or guidelines in place to regulate this “wild west” of the surveillance economy. An optimistic premise would be the identification of morally ambiguous business standards as they become clear over time. Generation Z is the first to be born into this ‘Brave New World,’ the long-term effects are yet to be understood. However perhaps, there are alternatives to being swallowed by the synthetic void.

CHAPTER TWO

THE BIG CREEP

Cyber Noir

“The stuff that dreams are made out of.”

-Sam Spade, *The Maltese Falcon*

“I was born when she kissed me, I died when she left me, and I lived a few weeks when she loved me.”

-Dix Steele, *In a Lonely Place*

In 2007, the personal computer entered our pockets. Since that point, we have slowly become enmeshed into mass connectivity and mediated interfacing. Deciphering how this became the norm has felt to me like being a detective scrutinizing a crime scene. Indeed, some of my thesis work directly references this idea pictorially. I tend to ruminate on the pernicious qualities of cyberspace and have come to see hardboiled, noir and neo-noir imagery as potential metaphors for these characteristics. The sustained popularity of noir and neo-noir suggest that its themes and striking imagery are perhaps most appealing as communities are undergoing transitional instability.

Fiction writer and noir scholar Megan Abbot responded to the question of why people gravitate toward noir saying, “noir is weirdly ahistorical. Regardless of national mood, people respond on a visceral level to certain essential drives ... Noir has always been a place where desires run amok” (Abbot). Noir plots play on those forbidden desires: wanting what we can’t

have, dreaming so big it becomes delusion and sexual taboo. In an article about noir writer Cornell Woolrich, academic Eddie Duggan discusses the psychological aspects of the noir protagonist, “Paranoia, insecurity, doubts and fears about identity, sexuality, and personal safety are the key fault lines of the noir personality” (Duggan, 3). The internet, like the cinematography of noir, can be a shadowy place where things aren’t what they seem, people hide behind a fictionalized version of themselves, in order to pursue their forbidden desires in the shadows. Naturally, the mindset of this space can foster psychological instability. The scenario of questioning what is ‘real’ is often what the main character of a noir narrative slowly unravels, usually concluding with, purposelessness, injustice, paranoia and nihilism. Throughout the majority of human history, real time communication has required face to face contact. However, in the last 100 years or so, real time communication has become abstracted via telephones and further abstracted via text, email, and video communication. Human evolutionary hardwiring views this new abstracted version of interfacing with a natural paranoia and distrust; we never quite know for certainty who or what is on the other side of the screen (Zuboff, 281).

The *femme fatale* is probably the most consistent aspect of noir fiction. The *femme fatale* comes in the form of a mysterious, seductive, young, beautiful woman who charms men and leads them into deadly traps. The *femme fatale* manipulatively targets a vulnerable, naive or fatally flawed accomplice. A classic example is the character of Phyllis Dietrichson played by Barbara Stanwyck in 1944’s *Double Indemnity*. After initial reservations, the loquacious Phyllis seduces insurance salesman Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray) and convinces him to murder her husband, in order to collect a double indemnity life insurance clause. The co-conspirators think they’ve committed the perfect murder, but everything quickly goes awry as they become

paranoid toward one another. The film ends with a deadly climax for Phyllis and an implied life imprisonment sentence for Walter.

It could be strongly argued that the most valuable “resource” we have as humans is time. If you believe this, then the most criminal offense would be to “steal” someone’s time. In Noir fiction the *femme fatale* often pulls the victim into a trap that either ends in their murder, imprisonment or fugue state ultimately robbing the victim of their freedom and hence their time. The beauty and mystery of the *femme fatale* functions as a false front to lure the unfulfilled victim. In the classic noir film, the *femme fatale* is a siren usually taking the form of an alluringly styled woman, “If the criminal was a woman, elegantly attired and handsomely coiffured, she could be a noir icon: a femme fatale with a gun resting against her Jean Louis gown” (Dick, 156). In the contemporary digital space, such a “siren” is one of many potentially mysterious and aesthetically appealing ‘false fronts’ leading you into a trap; gradually and insidiously stealing your time and replacing it with feelings of paranoia, purposelessness and nihilism. This “rabbit-hole” of addictive, “viral” content is implicitly limitless. The hook used to pull in the viewer can operate in many different styles, with the eventual endpoint being the same; the interface as a time sink in the purest sense. Or things can be even worse, we can additionally be suckered into aggressive algorithms, viruses or worms, installing browser “cookies” that track and aggregate our data and online activity, robbing us of time, money, and hope.

Noir roman and hardboiled fiction are often confused for the same term because they share many similarities such as sex, violence and systemic corruption. However, there is a key difference in *noir roman*: the protagonist is unusually criminal in nature and psychologically

unstable. 1940s and 1950s noir characters are oftentimes highly gendered; the genre reflects post-war male anxiety concerning disruptions in the heteronormative patriarchal system (Barroso). Men returning from the war sought to retake the workplace from women who had discovered financial independence and freedom. This became an important period for the reconfiguration of gender identity and gender hierarchies (Kaplan). This is why the *femme fatale* is often positioned against the romanticized hardboiled detective or the gullible blue-collar man.

Jim Thompson's 1954 novel *Hell of a Woman* features the protagonist Dolly who thinks the world is out to get him. Dolly's thoughts on women and restaurants:

“I sat down in a booth, and the waitress shoved a menu in front of me. There wasn't anything on it that sounded good, and anyway, one look at her and my stomach turned flipflops... Every goddamned restaurant I go to, it's always the same way ... They'll have some old bag on the payroll — I figure they keep her locked up in the mop closet until they see me coming. And they'll doll her up in the dirtiest goddamned apron they can find and smear that crappy red polish all over her fingernails, and everything about her is smeary and sloppy and smelly. And she's the dame that always waits on me.” (Thompson, 95).

Dolly is a down and outer living in a 'dump' working for a shady company he occasionally steals from as a door-to-door salesman. He hits his wife and feels most women are 'old bags' or 'tramps'. He commits multiple murders to cover up a plot to steal 100,000 dollars cash. These homicides include his pregnant wife, with the rationalization, 'it was too late to stop'. At the end Dolly doesn't get the money or the girl and the narrative fractures into a schizoid nightmare of indecipherable horror. The tragically flawed protagonist either becomes a victim or must victimize others and ultimately has to confront a fate where no moral course is discernible. *Noir roman* usually ends nihilistically and bleakly as seen in the case of Dolly.

Conversely, hardboiled fiction usually features a detective or private eye as its main character. The detective character possesses a moral code; This person may break or bend the law but only because he seeks an ultimate justice that the law can't cover. "When things seem to be going badly in a society, people sympathize with characters who distrust or operate outside of that society's governing systems" (Abbot). In *The Maltese Falcon*, Humphrey Bogart iconically embodies the hardboiled detective as the part of Sam Spade. Spade intermingles with criminals and police alike playing both sides against each other to get what he wants. He engages in a romantic relationship with *femme fatale*, Bridget O'Shaughnessy. Spade is immune to the relationships' consequences, before O'Shaughnessy is arrested for murder in the final scene. Spade proclaims, "I won't play the sap for you, I don't care who loves who." In the end of hardboiled fiction, the detective is able to walk away relatively unscathed, sometimes unresolved, no better off and probably broken-hearted; he plays by his own rules to match the moral landscape of the surrounding corruption and finishes with a stalemate; the best you can do in the noir city.

The two sub genres of crime fiction *noir roman* and hardboiled are meaningful attitudes to contemplate when engaging with the digital meta verse. Ruminating on the philosophical implications of technology can cause one to identify with the lose/lose scenario of *noir roman*:

"In noir, everyone is fallen, and right and wrong are not clearly defined and maybe not even attainable. In that sense, noir speaks to us powerfully right now, when certain structures of authority don't make sense any longer, and we wonder: Why should we abide by them?" (Abbot).

The mediated world can be overbearing and destabilizing, with truth impossible to discern and traditional institutions often under scrutiny. At every turn, it can be hard to avoid the

constant intrusion of algorithmic tech pushing its way into your presence. If it's not immediately apparent, it is present in the periphery. Obsessive addiction can lead to behaviors such as targeting political figures with mailbombs, compulsive stalking of an imagined lover, or gambling away your family's fortune via online poker. Unfortunately, as mentioned earlier, many big tech companies have purposefully designed user interfaces to instigate the latter addictive behaviors. Without any concern for moral hazard, engagement can become a lose/lose scenario for the user.

Adapting the code of the hardboiled detective may be a helpful exercise to navigate the digital space relatively unharmed. Connectivity is here to stay, fighting against the forces that intrude on attention will be a constant threat. To dream of life without interactivity is a fantasy, but addiction can be controlled. It takes a strong and decisive effort to unplug, and if you succeed, it's nearly impossible to maintain this separation for long, society is operating from a point of entrenched reliance.

In my experience, a gradual buildup of momentum is required to reverse cerebral flow, away from the addictive consumption of contradictory or ambivalent information and the ways it can infect an understanding of reality. In my experience, reversing this tendency requires an immersive activity which pushes against the limits of attention, forcing a pocket to emerge. Inside the "pocket", an awareness of presence can emerge. Such reconfigured notions of presence come in the form of experiences that urgently force us into the present moment. These experiences can vary significantly in range from the immediate danger of a car accident to the euphoria of a first kiss. The luminescence of presence flares up at these times and sharpens the senses making us feel supremely alive.

However, such effervescence is typically subsumed under the banal and mind-numbing activities that take up most of our lives. The way the human mind has evolved it must function in a certain way for society to operate 'normally'. The term 'blindsight' refers to people who are cortically blind (having a normally functioning eye but total or partial loss of vision due to damage in the occipital cortex) but are still able to respond to visual stimuli they cannot see. An example would be when a blind eye follows motion. This term is relevant because it highlights the mass of data we are reviewing through our sensorium on a moment-to-moment basis unconsciously. The mind must block out what is unimportant in order for us to focus on taking care of basic needs. Therefore, those moments when the sensorium perks up and pays extra attention are rare. Finding a way to reinvigorate and extend a luminous presence is the pinnacle of 'direct living'.

If 'direct living' is authentic and "real", then "secondary living" can refer to the media saturated mind: algorithmic, screen interfaced and preprogrammed. The technological media apparatus largely operates in the blindsight zone of our minds. It is surveilling and recording our every move feeding us synthetic filler while we respond like the blind eye following motion across the room, largely unconscious of the greater algorithmic structures at work. In the meantime, you've wasted an hour watching tick tok, bought an industrial lint roller and have a sudden craving for pulp free orange juice.

Internalized Hard Fought Morality

"You just keep leading with your chin and don't you compromise!"

-Katie Bannion, *The Big Heat*

“When the spirit wanes, form appears”

-Charles Bukowski

So how does one become the hardboiled detective, capable of navigating the media saturated world free of pessimism? For me, it's an attempt to unravel the mystery through meditation. Part of that meditation or 'direct living' is the construction of an art object and in its final form, in my case a painting. The construction of the art object is much like the unraveling of a mystery. At the beginning, there is an inkling or an irksome image which forms in my mind's eye, this may or may not get put down as a vague sketch. Many initially appearing images do not gain enough of my attention to reach past the vague sketch stage. If the image continues to remain a pest, a more detailed sketch (watercolor or drawing) will follow, giving a clue to the images' thematic content.

When the initial image has enough momentum to become a painting, a canvas must be constructed. It is important that my process does not become formulaic, it is under constant pressure to evolve. Challenging myself to improve is what keeps the process fresh. I taught myself basic woodworking skills for the purpose of building canvases in 2014. At that time my canvases were warped, knotted and asymmetrical. Over the years I have picked up tips from different artists and wood workers on how to improve my design, though there is always plenty of room for improvement. My process is also thorough and time-consuming, which is one of its best qualities. I have multiple options to buy prefabricated canvas, but I find building a canvas from scratch to be a valuable use of time. This arduous process gives me the ability to

personalize each surface, but ultimately this is not why I construct my own canvas. The more important reason is because of the bond I form with the work. I am far less likely to abandon a handmade canvas than a store-bought canvas; I value my time over my money. From surface to bones, a sense of deeper connection forms between myself and emanates from the art object.

When paint finally touches canvas the presence is deeply immersive. Anyone who has followed my work over the last three years, can observe the differences in style and subject matter. Even within my thesis paintings, which were all made within the last six months, there is an obvious difference in painting style and subject matter. The portrait of my father is large and impasto, the canopic jars are a modestly sized 20” x 16” painted *alla prima*, and the car wreck was painted over months in a slow buildup of transparent glazes.

New content requires new technique, which forces a shifting process. When the process is done too quickly or too easily; I am not getting what I want. The work requires mystery and struggle for growth to happen. For example, the painting of the two babies breastfeeding was executed in a day and a half of work. I think the piece is well painted, but I do not feel the same kind of attachment as I do the wrecked car or hanging girl. These two paintings were ambitious, challenging and required me to refine my technique in order to solve technical problems that arose. I am not totally satisfied with these pieces and probably won't be but looking back I will see them as incredibly valuable for my growth as a painter.

I work intuitively and rarely duplicate the same process; the images I paint are generated from a place that I don't fully understand. Painting an image over eight to forty-eight hours gives me ample time to ponder why I was compelled to bring it to life. If the reasons are superficial, motivation to follow through will cave in and many of my works have found their

way to the art junkyard this way. If the piece is worked all the way through, there comes a sense of resolution. Like the detective at the end of the hardboiled film, the resolution is not always satisfying and may only have value as a step toward the next project. The true value is in the process of the creation, which acts as a respite from the data onslaught butting into my precious realm of present consciousness. On some level it doesn't matter what I paint as long as I paint with intention and focus.



Figure 1 - Crime Scene Investigator by Thomas Pomarico



Figure 2 - Out of the Past by Thomas Pomarico

CHAPTER THREE

THE BIG HEAD

Frank or the Postmodern Prometheus

“Images are made with other images in mind”

-Jean-Luc Godard

“The portrait of the giant head is supposed to be iconic, assumed to be resembling what it represents”

-Wendy Steiner

I painted a 6-foot tall 4 ½ foot wide portrait of my father’s head during the fall semester of my 3rd year MFA program (*figure 3*). In many ways, I consider this work a success, it is a large and bold picture. I find the content relevant because through this picture, I can demonstrate the fusion of media influences saturating my thoughts, calling my own validity and authenticity as an artist into question. These saturated thoughts cause me to identify with the psychologically fractured protagonist of *noir roman*. I am self-deprecating because of my inability to produce anything I deem original or authentic; comparisons inevitable. I am left with the question whether or not I am a simulacrum of what an artist should be (as fed to me historically through media representations). What I think I should be doing as an artist often does not align with the



Figure 3 - Frank by Thomas Pomarico

reality of my situation. Perhaps the label of artist isn't as important as my continued search, in spite of an ironic internal dialogue of self-mockery. The challenge to break away from the ironic can cause stagnancy, gridlock. Each conversation is a scripted platitude, an endless feedback

loop of artistic cliches. I keep focused on the bottom line; my work still engages in a pursuit of ‘direct living’ outside of connectivity’s data stream.

At this time, I am an academic and an artist and therefore obsessed with historically contextualizing each piece. Often this self-talk will boil down an image into a list of names. The names I list are influences which can be identified by my internal critic. They are the names of individuals who I believe did what I’m trying to do only better. Unfortunately, once an artist looks at enough works, it's impossible to delete the visual data of what went before. This can kill my naïve motivation that I’m constructing something original. So, I acknowledge my influences or move on to something different. This brings us to large scale portrait painting; a genre often associated with the final quarter of the 20th century. It’s hard for any historically studied contemporary artist to not think of Chuck Close, Lucian Freud or Jenny Saville when they see such works.

Chuck Close would choose family and friends for his portraits. First, he would stage a photograph of the subject, then reproduce that photograph on a large canvas divided into a precise grid. By breaking the picture into small units, that vary only based on the color in each, he is able to precisely copy the photograph on a massive scale. The giant head is decontextualized from any historical or narrative space, traditionally associated with portraiture and instead alludes to the invasive confrontation of the passport or mugshot photo with every defect or blemish retained (*figure 4*). The medium is a constant intrusion into his pictures, by referencing photography via the blur of a short focal length, “the painting is a copy not of reality,

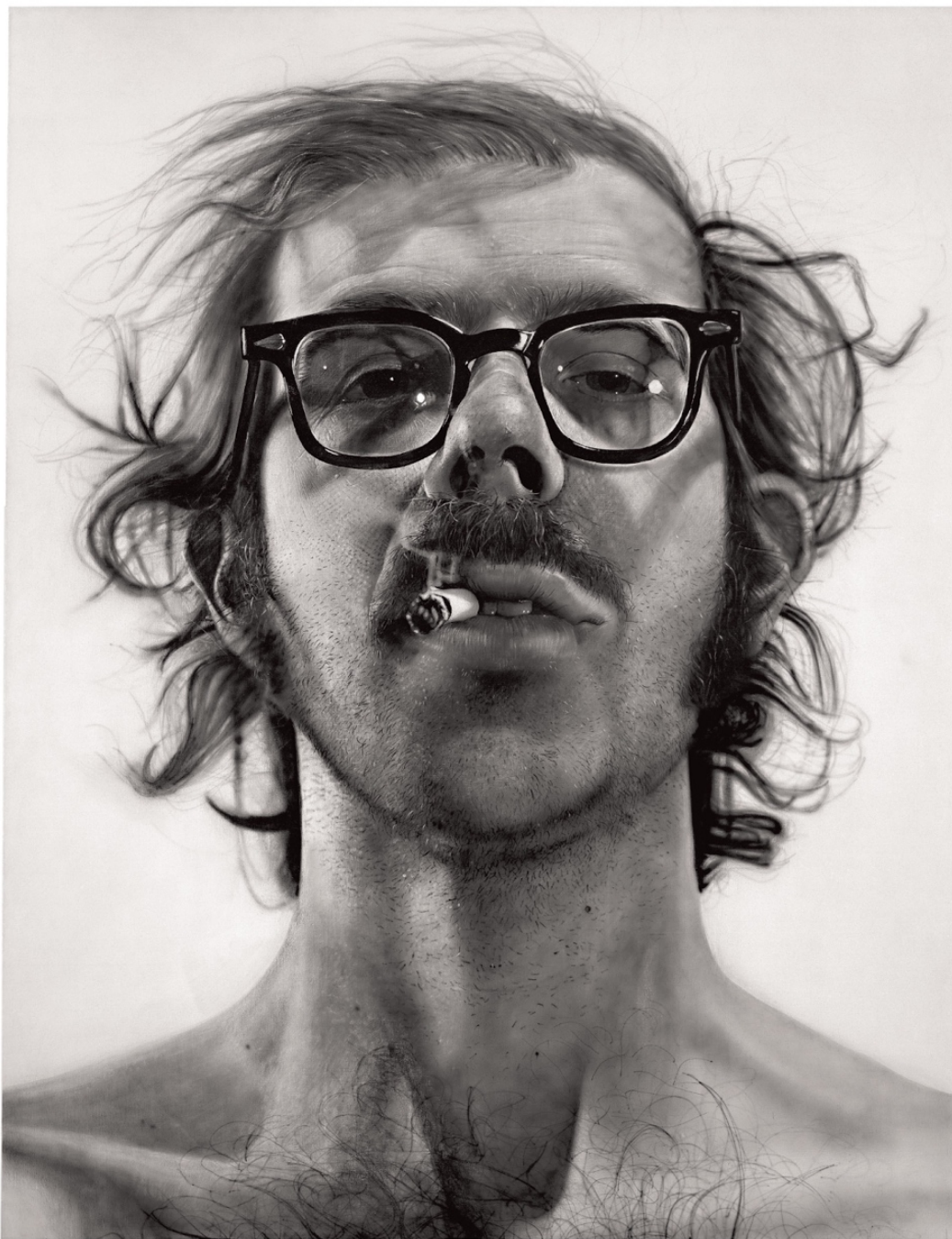


Figure 4 - Self Portrait by Chuck Close

but of a photograph which is already a copy of the original.” Close points to the idiom of photography instead of the idiom of painting. Over time Close’s process became more mechanically abstracted through the grid and color play; the image mimicking the effect of

magnifying a photograph on a computer to a pixelated abstraction, but from afar appears as photo realism (*figure 5*).

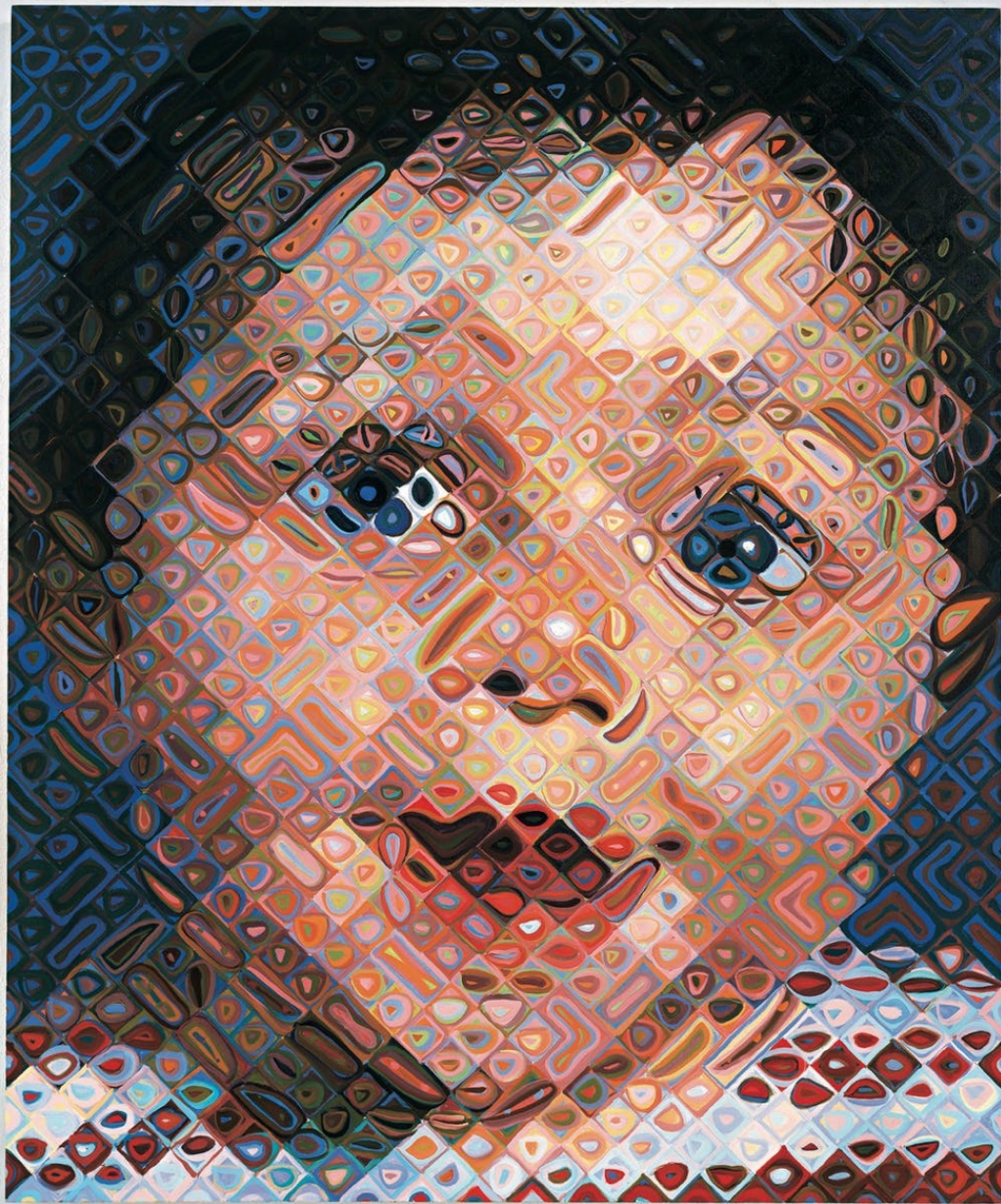


Figure 5 - Baby by Chuck Close

Socrates discusses intentional distortion of the copy for the viewer to perceive it proportionally in the *Sophist*. In Plato's *Sophist*, two types of imitation are defined; the 'Likeness-making', which consists of "whenever someone produces an imitation by keeping to the proportions of length, breadth, and the depth of his model, and also by keeping to the appropriate colors of its parts" (*Sophist*, 23). A potential example of this 'likeness-making' would be Chuck Close's earlier black and white portrait photograph paintings. He recreates the photograph in exact proportion and color even adds idiomatic defects in fidelity to the original. It's important to keep in mind that Close is not making a likeness of the person, but a likeness of the photograph. The second type of imitation discussed in the *Sophist* is, 'appearance-making,' "these craftsmen say goodbye to truth, and produce in their images the proportions that seem to be beautiful instead of the real ones" (*Sophist*, 23). In the context of the discussion, two interlocutors are referring specifically to works that are massively large, and if viewed from the ground become distorted. The works are constructed to take viewing perspective into account.

Hans Holbein the younger plays with this concept in a 1553 painting entitled *The Ambassadors* (figure 6). In this painting a strange shape is cutting through the bottom middle of the image; the viewer must get on a knee and stand extremely close to the left of the shape. Looking upward they see a skull in perfect perspective; an interesting trick which forces the viewer to think about perspective, surface, and imitation. Evan Penny, a contemporary sculptor, is another example of an artist who distorts perception by making hyperrealistic sculptures extremely thin. From a specific vantage point, they are properly proportioned and realistic, but from all other perspectives they are uncomfortably strange to look at. Perhaps the later pixelated



Figure 6 - The Ambassadors by Hans Holbein the Younger

abstractions by Chuck Close are a distortion of the photograph which reveals something about the beauty of the photograph that contradicts his earlier direct imitation. Looking at the picture

broken into tiny corpuscles, we become aware of the visual building blocks in a meaningful way the seamless copy doesn't allow for.

Many amateur art connoisseurs will use the phrase, "It looks like a photograph." This phrase is commonly used as a stand-in for 'it looks like reality or realism', but a photograph also should not be taken to mean reality. A photograph has a certain amount of distortion, color palette shift, and blur not noticeable to regular human vision. Also, human vision itself must be called into question, because it too is not reality but a subjectively inflected filter. We now know that objects in the world do not have an inherent color, our minds create the color based off of the way our vision has been tuned through millennia of evolution.

The painting of my father pays homage to Chuck Close. I took the photograph of my father while he was watching TV sitting on the couch, an intimate domestic setting. He was wearing his nighttime clothes and unaware that I was going to take the photo - an invasion of privacy in a way. I altered the photograph with digital software to draw out specific contrasts in the planes of his face and then cropped it to fit the format of a mugshot or passport photo. After the image was prepared in post-production, I gridded it and loosely copied the grid onto the large-scale canvas. When transferring image through drawing, I am not as stiff as Close but instead like to use the grid to map composition. I prefer to retain a loose and gestural drawing in thinned turpentine paint as an initial stage. My copy of the photograph is not a 'likeness-making' copy but more of an 'appearance-making' copy. The process of converting my father's head into a painting goes through multiple filters. These filters make it more appealing as an image. I often delete the photograph I work from, because at the end of the process it has no bearing for comparison and would not be much of an image to study in my own opinion. The

physical filter of technically rendering the photograph is the portion of the process that makes the final image worth contemplating.

The 20th century British painter **Lucian Freud**, grandson of the famous psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, chose as his favorite subject matter a theme exhaustively familiar to art history: the portrait and the nude figure. My brushwork is heavily influenced by Lucian Freud's mature period. Freud has been a presence in my work since I switched from painting large abstracts to larger-than-life portraits in 2017. I'm fascinated by the technique Freud used of turning painting into sculpture. Freud's later emblematic works came from years of refinement.

“Since his youth, the artist had used fine, delicate sable brushes to achieve his precisely rendered images. He had also followed the traditional method of sitting while studying his model and applying paint to canvas. But growing restlessness in his personal life, along with intimate exposure to the art and ideas of Francis Bacon made him yearn for a freer method of working.” (Finger, 25).

In the early 1960s, Freud would change his posture to a standing position and trade in his fine tiny sable brushes for thicker hogs-hair brushes which enabled his expressive application. The pinnacle of his mature style would be the self-portrait from 1985 entitled *Reflection* (figure 7).

This self-portrait features an aging Freud nude from the shoulders up looking coldly at himself in the mirror, “wrinkles and folds appear hardened and stony, complimenting the steely expression in the eyes” (Finger, 78). Brad Finger, author of *Freud* compares the picture to the sculptural figures of Rodin which Freud would decorate his studio with; crusty stiff paint is pushed together into a mosaic of grey, creme and brown brushwork. The quality of brushwork I find seductive in Freud's mature period from the late 1960s to the 1990s is due to the combination of aggressive and brutal material application, complimented by complex color

mixing and an attention to detail. His examination of the face reaches a level of clinical observation as every reflective tone is rendered, every contour and curve are scrutinized.



Figure 7 - Reflection by Lucian Freud

Large scale paintings would go on for 50 to 100 hours. Because Freud worked exclusively from life, this process would be taxing on the models. Freud often chose models most available to him for sitting, especially before he achieved renown as a portraitist. The 1979 painting *Rose (figure 8)* caused a bit of controversy when it was unveiled. This was because Rose, his daughter, is painted fully naked and with her legs spread. Rose is on record saying that she wanted her portrait to be different. The body is not idealized but almost masculine in its muscle tone reminiscent of the female sculptures of Michelangelo. Every muscle and joint of the anatomy are discernible and complexly portrayed with the observation of a doctor diagnosing a patient. The flesh is a mosaic of patches reflective variations of light making the body into a landscape.

Although the painting is stylized in a somber palette and the proportions slightly exaggerated, Rose is depicted with an unsettling realism, an all too clear reminder that humans are animals; bodies are survival machines with imperfections. Rose's legs are spread in the picture which would usually denote sexual availability, but her genitals are not presented as appealing, and are instead mysteriously dark and wildly hairy. The thought of sexualizing this painting is also further perverted by the fact that she is the artist's daughter. The picture of Rose shows her foremost as a body. There is a pathological attention to anatomy but the body in the gaze is not one of desirable beauty. It is presented in a disturbing context.

The portrait is simple, a man paints his daughter, however it is highly conceptual upon close examination. She refused to look obedient. Her right arm is raised, it lays on top of her face obscuring her eyes, denying access to her interior. Her right leg is bent and appears tense as if she is about to spring up off the couch. The pose does not look naturally relaxed, but irritated



Figure 8 - Portrait of Rose by Lucian Freud

or annoyed. An important point about Lucian Freud is his similarity to many classical artists' in content; a young woman laying on a couch. In his version the atmosphere is unnerving, the

couch is old and dirty with a visible tear right under Rose's hip, a blanket is wrapped around her leg as if she just kicked it off, an old shoe is seen under the couch.

One of the reasons why I created large expressive abstracts was due to the unrestrained brushwork and the freedom from representational expectation. When painting an abstract, I would apply paint in layers searching for the pleasing form but with no concrete goal nor endpoint outlined; the painting could potentially go on forever. The conceptual motivation for these abstract works was the material alone and it proved to not be enough (at the time) for sustained practice. The lack of direction and the lack of conceptual complexity ended up becoming a curse as I searched for discipline in my practice. Some restraint would eventually act facilitate more freedom. As I began to paint portraits and emulate Freud's technique, I initially found it puzzling how a painting could go on for 50 hours. When painting a portrait, I figured you'd mix the color and put it on the canvas: a piece of the puzzle is complete. I would paint a face for 6 to 8 hours, but 40 seemed incomprehensible. I compared my work to Freud's side by side and began to realize the level of nuance he achieved in the color mixing and the detail represented in myriad planes. Through this examination, I was able to evolve my own work, although I also discovered now my approach was divergent (Roth).

I focus on certain areas of a work as intensely as Freud does. Others I prefer to leave vague, unfinished or empty, as in the technique of an artist like Rembrandt, Sargent, Bacon, or Zorn. There is also my relationship with the models I have recourse to work with. I don't have the finances to compensate for a model appropriately at this point, therefore I use my family and friends. Since my portraits are not necessarily complementary to their subjects, there can be a hesitation to break through. My father is a safe subject to paint because he is not sensitive about

his appearance. I want to dig into the imperfections, the signs of aging in a face are unpleasant for some to focus on. Of course, Freud only painted from life and although I enjoy the challenge, intimacy, and duration of this process, it can be a logistical nightmare in graduate school and will have to wait till graduation for future experimentation. I have accepted the influence of Freud in my current practice and the inevitable comparison to his portraits. I find it important to acknowledge that Freud's work constantly evolved his entire life. I expect my own will as well, years from now his influence may be less pronounced.

Jenny Saville is a contemporary British painter known for her grotesque and large nudes of women, transgender and androgynous subjects. Some of Saville's works are extrapolations from forensic photographs of corpses. She calls the process of painting from these photographs, "a sort of discovery of the landscape of their face" (Gagosian, 124). Saville's portraits are non-traditional; instead of being a portrait of a person they are a portrait of a 'sensation or ideal.' The bodies she chooses emanate a sort of in-betweenness, "a hermaphrodite, a transvestite, a carcass, a half-alive/half-dead head" (Gagosian, 124). Saville's paintings are massive; 2004's *Stare* (figure 9) is 10' by 8.21', the picture depicts a young girl's head from the neck up filling three quarters of the picture. Saville likes to paint on a large scale because of the 'spaces' it offers. As with *Close* or *Freud* the work breaks down into abstraction up close but from a distance pulls into a readable and realistic portrait. In the case of Saville, a reference to realism persists. It is distinctly stylized by the paint medium via a virtuosity of brushstrokes with movement, vibrancy. Saville on scale: "Encountering a painting from a distance to being very close-up to a



Figure 9 - Stare by Jenny Saville

painting, the physical relationship of your body to scale of object and mark making” (Gagosian, 125). When looking at the shrunken image of *Stare*, it has a realism which references

photography in a similar way as Chuck Close; cropped in tightly on the head as if it were an identification photograph. A slice of the face is sharply focused: the nose, the mouth, the eyes. The eyes are specifically attractive in this piece, they are glassy, reflective jewels which stare into a deep horizon. Knowledge of the backstory informs us that the trance-like stare comes from a blind subject photographed by Saville at a hospital in Italy. A catalog of Saville's art contains a full picture of *Stare* with zoomed in thumbnails of the mouth and eyes. In these thumbnails, we see the features are abstracted to the level where they can be confused with an abstract expressionist like Willem de Kooning. Paint is smeared, smushed, dripped, splashed and the colors read more as science fiction illustration or marine painting.

I reference Saville's work in the painting of my father's head through the size. My painting is 6 ft by 4 ft, not quite as big but the subject is still much larger than life to achieve a similar effect. Due to the size, I can play with the space by packing detail in and stylizing the features into a patchwork of geometric brushstrokes. The eyes, mouth and nose were painted specifically with Saville in mind. Saville chooses subjects exuding 'in-betweenness' I also strive for this in my work although with a different intent. Often my portraits display a quality which makes the age difficult to discern, aspects of a subject like the eyes or hair may signify youth while other aspects such as the skin may have a weary and aged quality. My father is now 70 and although he is still lucid the signs of age show, his hearing is bad, he repeats himself often, he is forgetful and lives a life of simplicity and routine, not straying too far from home. He watches a lot of television in the mornings and evenings. There is a feeling of regression that I have become aware of even though my father is far from being an invalid. I am reminded of my Dad's father, my grandfather aging back into diapers, having a caretaker help him use the

bathroom and put him to bed. If one lives deep enough into old age, life cycles back to childhood. In my portrait of my father, I worked to achieve this connection between old age and infancy. The puffy neck, bulbous head, narrow eyes are reminiscent of the fat unformed head of a baby. The expressive trance could be read as a child transfixed on a common spectacle they have never witnessed before. Mouth slightly agape, the way one is when absorbed in what they are seeing; or perhaps an Alzheimer patient witnessing television without remembering what it is. My father is the armature for this concept, a stand in for the connection between the geriatric and the infant.

The Conceptual Organs of Frankenstein

“The truth will set you free. But not until it is finished with you.”

-David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest*

The physical makeup of the painting is heavily reliant on the influence of modern portrait masters. The conceptual makeup of the painting is equally reliant on modern masters, but literature is the primary inspiration for the portrait. The painting features the giant head of a man reclined comfortably with head tipped forward locked in a transient state, reflected in the man's glasses is the blue glow of a television. The blue light of the television is a subtle part of the painting but essential to the reading of its themes. Collecting, reading (and now recently selling) literature is a significant portion of my life. I've noticed my paintings cross into illustration. I grew up less than a mile from the University of Notre Dame and found great entertainment in

roaming the university bookstore as a child. It was riveting to compare the different publications in an attempt to decode why the cover image was chosen, especially when a piece of classical art was used. As a part time job, I work at a used bookstore, my responsibilities include sifting through donated books; mutating fashion has changed book covers through the years. This evolution has encouraged me to imagine alternative covers for my favorite books. The next conceptual leap envisions what an original image would be for covers of texts I am compelled to research.

Long after I have finished a painting, I'll realize why that image was stuck in my mind's eye, beyond conscious awareness. Often this fixation happens because the image sits at the intersection of multiple interests. A key inspiration marinating in my mind's eye during the creative production of my father's portrait, is 1996's *Infinite Jest* by David Foster Wallace. The themes featured within *Infinite Jest* (specifically entertainment addiction) continually endure. I noticed this relevance when key elements of *Infinite Jest* were echoed in texts I read written before and after Wallace; Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964), Neil Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (1985), Shoshana Zuboff's *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (2019) and *The Molecule of More* (2018) by Daniel Z. Lieberman and Michael Long. I like to think (perhaps generously) that the painting of my father's glazed over stare could function as an illustration for all of these texts.

In David Foster Wallace's speculative fiction novel *Infinite Jest* the character James O. Incadenza, a tennis instructor and genius avant garde filmmaker, creates the titular film titled

Infinite Jest, known throughout the novel as ‘the entertainment’ or the ‘samizdat’⁴. Once Infinite Jest is viewed, the mind becomes insatiable; its only desire is to continue watching the deadly film over and over. A character called the medical attaché accidentally watches ‘the entertainment’ in the beginning of the novel. When his wife comes home, “and sees the Near Eastern medical attaché and his face and tray and eyes and the soiled condition of his special recliner ... trying to get a response, failing to get any response to her, he is still staring straight ahead” (Wallace, 79). A group of Canadian terrorists bound to wheelchairs ‘*Les Assassins des Fauteuils Rollents*’, is disgruntled by the U.S. government's dumping of toxic garbage in the province of Quebec. They embark on a mission to acquire the deadly film with the intention of unleashing it upon the American population. When the wheelchair assassins finally acquire a copy of ‘the entertainment’, they test it on a captured Ph.D. student by threatening to remove a digit from his hand with each subsequent viewing; the student does not protest or notice the amputation of his fingers while watching the film (Wallace, 727). This assures ‘the entertainment’ is macropolitically lethal. The Canadian terrorists carry out their plans with confidence assured by American fixation on entertainment, initiating an apocalypse.

⁴ The imagery of ‘the entertainment’ is never clearly defined, but in one passage the character Molly Notkin is interrogated giving a hint to the potential content of the film. Joelle van Dyne who is also known by the alias Madame Psychosis and the P.G.O.A.T. (prettiest girl of all time) is the muse of James O. Incandenz. Notkin states, “it [the entertainment] features Madame Psychosis as some kind of maternal instantiation of the archetypal figure Death, sitting naked, corporeally gorgeous, ravishing, hugely pregnant, her hideously deformed face either veiled or blanked out by undulating computer-generated squares of color” (Wallace, 788). An interesting gesture by Wallace to hint the deadly entertainment is instigated by a deranged motherly form of the femme fatale.

This dark humor is a caricaturist representation of entertainment addiction, but in many ways is not far from the truth. It's not uncommon for online gamers to urinate in bottles for fear of missing the action. In 2007, Daniel Petric of Wellington Ohio, at the age of 16, shot his mother and father over a confiscated copy of Microsoft's science fiction/adventure, first person shooter, *Halo 3*. Petric tried to frame the scene as a murder/suicide, when his sister and brother in-law showed up at the house, Petric fled the scene in the family van with his copy of Halo 3 in hand headed to a friend's house where he could play. Petric was arrested and sentenced to life in prison with the possibility of parole in 2030. The case has been a disturbing study in video game addiction and is often referenced in debates against video game violence. Was the video responsible for the incident? The validity of these claims is up for debate, but it's not an isolated event and people have murdered for less.

Wallace's fictional film 'Infinite Jest' asks the question 'what happens when we follow this desire to its logical endpoint'? Prophecies about consumerism and entertainment addiction in the 1990s have come to full fruition in the 2020s. My generation is part of a unique segment of time, having lived through the rise of the internet, the smartphone, and the invention of social media. As stated above, the rate of acceleration in internet consumption since its public introduction in the 1990s has been exponential. This brings us back to the connection between childhood and old age. Entertainment addiction suggests a regression in critical thinking pulling us back into adolescence⁵, or in the case of *Infinite Jest* into infancy, unable to take care of our most basic needs. The glowing blue light in my father's glasses could be read as an embodiment

⁵ I think of adolescence in this case as a parallel to the doe-eyed noir protagonist motivated by the essentially visceral desires presented by the femme fatal.

of a victim caught in the circular zombified viewing of ‘the entertainment’ on repeat, unable to feed himself or empty his bladder for fear of missing out.

Deep in the bowels of *Infinite Jest*, during a clandestine meeting, undercover C.I.A. Agent Hugh Steeply tells a personal anecdote to agent Remy Marathe of the rogue terrorist wheelchair assassins. Steeply recounts the ravaging effects of entertainment addiction on his father; “sometime around midlife, we watched him get consumed with a sort of entertainment. It wasn’t pretty. I was never sure how it started or what it was about” (Wallace, 639). It starts with Steeply’s father watching the original run of M*A*S*H* once a week. The show has an absurdly long run of almost 20 years, “it just wouldn’t die.” After the show goes into syndication, Steeply’s father watches the reruns religiously, demanding that he watch every airing. Soon he brings a TV to his work to watch reruns during the day. He also begins to supplement his consumption by recording missed episodes on a Betamax; “He stored the tapes, organizing them in baroque systems of cross-reference that had nothing discernible to do with dates of recording” (Wallace, 641). Only two years till retirement, they tell him not to come to work anymore after 35 years, because of customers complaining about M*A*S*H* conversations; “He started developing this habit of quoting little lines and scenes from M*A*S*H* to illustrate some idea, make some point in conversation” (Wallace, 642). When a single episode was missed, he would get anxious, angry, as the condition progressed, he became unable to converse about anything other than the program. The man became so obsessed with M*A*S*H* that he believed secret conspiracies were encoded into the program about the end of the world, the apocalypse. He wrote letters to all of the characters, unable to discern the actor from the character they played. He eventually dies of a heart attack but shortly before, “the old

man let it be known he was working on a secret book that revised and explicated much of the world's military, medical, philosophical and religious histories by analogies to certain subtle and complex thematic codes in M*A*S*H*" (Wallace, 643). He leaves behind a closet full of notebooks with inaccessible theories. Steeply is emotional recalling the slow descent into lunacy.

My father was the captain of a college football National Championship team at the University of Notre Dame in 1973. This event happened almost 50 years ago, yet it is still present in his life, mediated through technology. Similar to Steeply's father in the anecdote, my father also recorded TV on Betamax and VCR throughout my childhood. He would watch and rewatch old college football games and take notes on them, organizing all the tapes by season and date. I remember the day he was excited to discover that all of his old games from the 1970s were on YouTube, he could rewatch them and share them over and over. Fortunately, he found some positive outlets for some of this technologically mediated 'living past.' He has been on a weekly radio show for over 20 years analyzing Notre Dame football during the season and he co-wrote a book about his time playing football. He has since acquired a publisher, and currently participates in book signings and motivational speaking related to achieving one's dreams.

Entertainment today is highly personalized. If you interact with electronic devices of connectivity, big tech firms are mining your surplus data, this allows them to know you more intimately. Aggressive algorithms analyze the application user's interactions to optimize their feed for maximal attentiveness. The general public assumes this has to do with the intrusive advertisements that pop up on your YouTube screen or in your Instagram scroll, but the more insidious intentions of this surveillance/attention economy are below the user's level of

conscious awareness. Much of this behavior is instigated by Facebook and other social media, and in my opinion, my father's activities are more productive and healthier than other hobbies people develop via the internet. For example, political soapboxing and conspiracy theory addiction run rampant in cyberspace and tend to escalate the more one engages. Algorithms will aggressively feed to aggravate the condition. It may start with a few harmless JFK conspiracies but quickly these theories become, deep state, UFO, reptile elite, new world order, etc., etc. As in the corrupted morally ambiguous underworld of the noir film the competing narratives of the media hydra jostle for attention drowning any possibility of truth. Navigation of this space requires deep arduous research that few participate in.

My father is able to channel his energy and enthusiasm into creatively positive outlets. In a broad sense, I see my creative process as analogous. There are multiple ways to express anxieties of the age, some more volatile than others. Painting requires active unplugged engagement and, in my case, reflective thinking; the canvas becomes a safe area for my expression to act out and ultimately be shared.

CONCLUSION

Something to Share

“In the age of the reproducibility of almost everything physical, human presence is one of the few things that cannot be multiplied indefinitely, an asset with some inbuilt scarcity”

-Hito Steyerl, *Art in the Age of Planetary Civil War*

The final segment in my creative process, operating extracurricular, is the presentation and reception. Regardless of how I feel about a work as an isolated item, it is important to string them together for a show. The show brings finality to a series and is an act of community building. Having a conversation with the community and specifically other artists in person is important to me. The images can lubricate a conversation for people of different walks of life, ideas cross pollinate, and connections are made. This happens outside of screen interfacing, which many people find refreshing and authentic. Occasionally, there is also the validation of a sale. I gave up trying to make work with consumer-trendy content long ago; however, I must admit compensation for the hard work (I've deemed to be meaningful) is welcome, especially when it goes to customers I love and respect as people.

My process makes a case for combating excessive media addiction, but it is important to note that it is not mutually exclusive. The hypothetical 'show' I reference will likely be brought into existence through social media. To build awareness, a following is established through Instagram and Facebook; most people will experience my work through the internet alone. The images featured in my thesis were primarily photographs, some sourced from the internet and others composed by me and processed through a computer. Sometimes when I paint, I listen to a

book, podcast, music or have a movie playing in the background. At this point, it is actually hard for me to imagine painting without an internet device streaming some sort of content to facilitate the process. Whatever I was consuming at the time of the painting may find its way into the work directly or indirectly; I can usually remember what I was listening to when I look at a certain passage of the piece.

Immersion too deeply into the worlds of *1984*, *Brave New World* and *Amusing Ourselves to Death* can cause pessimistic and counterproductive thought patterns. Any quick solution runs the risk of becoming a straw man. My formula is not without contradictions. The presentation of work in the white cube gallery comes with inherent paradox. The work may critique this paradox, but it is still reliant on its existence to function. If there was no paradox, there wouldn't need to be art. The best way I have found to engage with these contradictions is to acknowledge their existence and pass that knowledge onto the community and pupils. There are better and worse ways to set an example; I aim to relay the working parts of my formula with anyone interested. These 'working parts' entail the synthesis of conceptually absorbing ideas and the journey toward technical mastery. At this point I'm convinced; I have something meaningful to share and as such I am compelled to continue relaying my thoughts to others.

In reality, the world may have more in common with the *noir roman* than the hardboiled. There is no clear escape from the accelerating technology and an uncertain future. As a species we may adapt and learn to use our advancements maturely, or we may not. I find excitement in the continuing evolution of my own process. To some degree, I have a greater understanding of its function from pursuit of a master's degree at Montana State University. My thoughts have been generative approaching the end; I'm interested in

researching the materiality of paint more deeply, subtle color mixing and hope to explore a new series that is worked completely from life. Painting with a deeper focus and less distractions can expand on the theories I already have on art and presence. Most importantly I look forward to teaching and sharing my works and thoughts with a new community wherever I end up.

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IMAGES



Image 1- Plughead by Thomas Pomarico



Image 2 - Paper Crane by Thomas Pomarico



Image 3 - Dodge (Troy Stevens' Buck) by Thomas Pomarico



Image 4 - Frank by Thomas Pomarico



Image 5 - ...Hope I never keep you waiting by Thomas Pomarico



Image 6 - Canopic Jars by Thomas Pomarico



Image 7 - Crime Scene Investigator by Thomas Pomarico

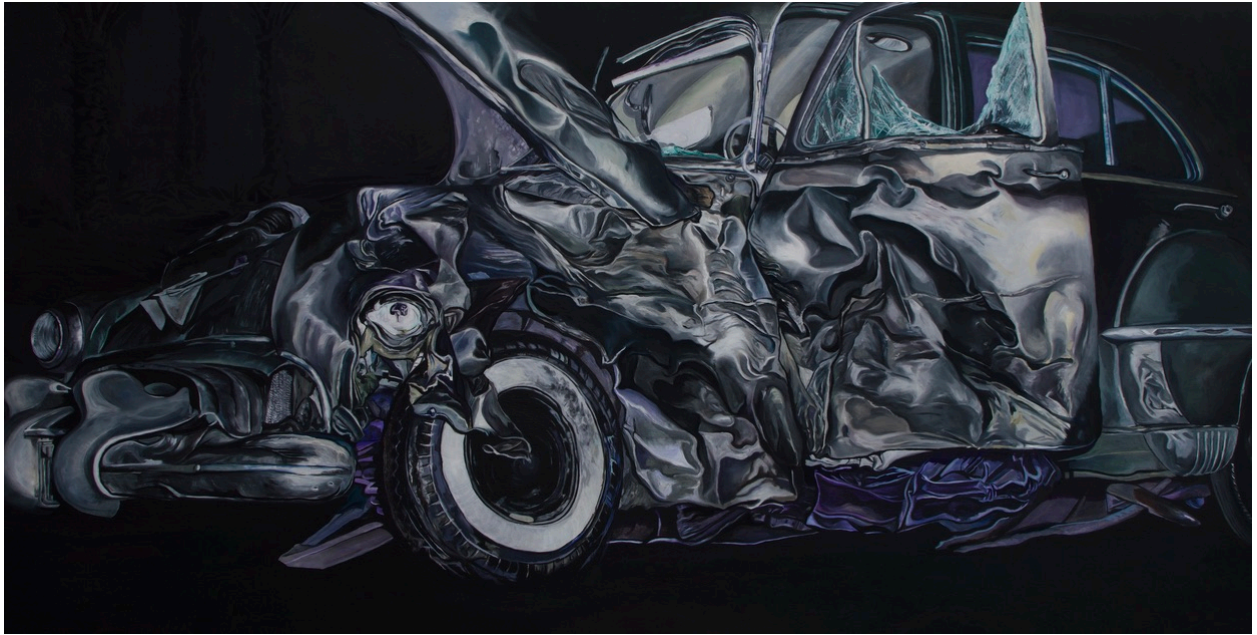


Image 8 - ...and he invented the car crash by Thomas Pomarico



Image 9 - Gemini by Thomas Pomarico



Image 10 - all caps by Thomas Pomarico



Image 11 - Into the Red Void by Thomas Pomarico



Image 12 - Out of the Past by Thomas Pomarico



Image 13 - Thesis Show 1



Image 14 - Thesis Show 2



Image 15 - Thesis Show 3



Image 16 – Thesis Show 4



Image 17 - Thesis Show 5

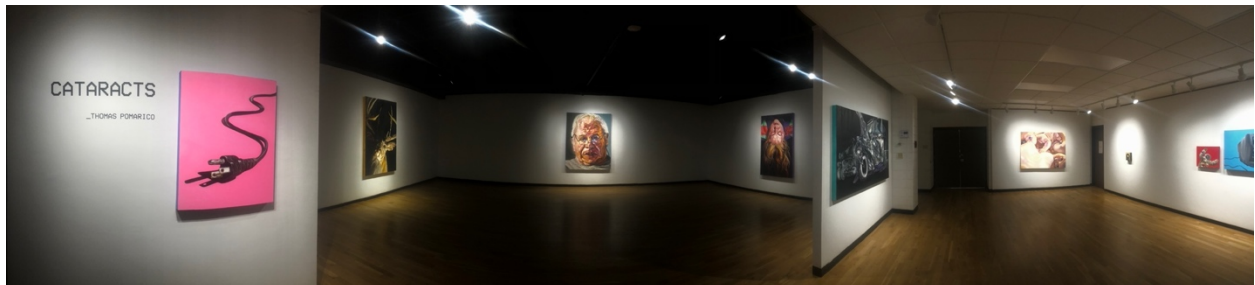


Image 18 - Thesis Show 6



Image 19 - Thesis Show 7



Image 20 - Thesis Show 8



Image 21- Thesis Show 9



Image 22 - Thesis Show 10



Image 23 - Thesis Show 11