Seeing Living Things: Observations of Figures From the Outside In

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SEEING LIVING THINGS:
OBservations of Figures FROM the Outside IN

by

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ABSTRACT

This writing accompanies the outcomes of my studio practice over the last three years, focusing on two bodies of work of paintings and drawings. In it I describe and analyze multiple influences tied to the progression and change in my studio practice. I began the process of my work with images and subjects from my home state of Florida, frequently juxtaposing the wildlife and humans, now I see this pattern as a byproduct of a studio practice functioning as a introspective reflection of what I experience, the things that I understand and the things that I don’t. I deconstruct elements of figures and landscape, removing most information but what is necessary to retain symbolic context, and allow physical windows into the past formal states of the work, exposing the audience to different periods of time and hinting at information now hidden under the finished image.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Dedicated to Allyson, Roland, Sue, Billy, Jennifer, Georgia and Arlo.
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INTRODUCTION

I was born in this state, in Vero Beach. Growing up, the flat emptiness of the land around central-south Florida seared an enduring image into my head. I remember driving on route 60 past acres of farmland, empty except for cypress domes so far in the distance the air turned them blueish-purple. I’d press my face against the backseat car window and the blurred posts of barbed wire fences would momentarily frame cows standing around in wetland grass grown in tuffs that hid their hooves from my eyes.

This left an impression of the ties between landscape and wildlife that contradicted other evidence I encountered. I would hike around the St. Sebastian Preserve in Fellsmere and find indications of animals that I could never catch more than a glimpse of. Tracks and scat of bobcats, coyotes, armadillos, and deer gave the feeling of missing the sight of them by a blind corner. I lived in Vero Beach during the development boom of pre-2008 Florida, and even with all the land clearing, concrete pouring, and fenced off empty soil lots, there was always enough evidence of local wildlife to emphasize their absence; a fox’s glowing eyes in the headlights, the skin of an opossum ground into the side of the road. These animals took on an almost mythical quality to me, through pictures in books and the occasional sighting in person in captivity and the wild, and their scarcity made them important to me.

When I first discovered painting, I began to visualize these ideas that had interested me regarding the feeling of disconnection between the Florida landscape and wildlife in my work. I painted murals of native species on buildings that replaced former habitat. I magnified the scale
of the animal images in an attempt to plant thoughts of their existence in the minds of passersby who would likely never see them or care to look for the evidence of them passing through when no one was around.

In comparison to my public paintings, the images I created in my studio took on more variation while continuing to relate to the same general theme. In pen and ink sketchbook drawings I visually worked through the idea of disconnecting figure from landscape by eliminating as much detail as possible while maintaining enough information to communicate the individual qualities of the image. In acrylic paintings on canvas, I began to paint animals and objects on a flat empty grey plane, severing them from a specific discernable place. Eventually, vertical lines functioned as windows through to earlier stages of painting processes that were injected back into the composition to give hints of depth and space. This created a visual connection to the most rudimentary shapes and forms of the landscapes of my childhood.

I began making images of a broader range of living things consisting of people, wild and domesticated animals, native and non-native to the state of Florida. The living things that I was painting expanded from images of endangered species to a broader range of living things I had been encountering in life. In Early 2017, I visited a Greyhound rescue and began focusing on the image of the greyhound in many of my paintings and drawings. I found the unique, almost eerie anatomy of this breed of dog to be visually compelling because their physicality conveys both outward vulnerability and menace, while at the same time reflecting the kind of people who care for them or exploit them.
GREY HOUNDS AND PORTRAITS AND INFLUENCES

Through a kind of peripheral cultural awareness of Greyhounds and a fascination with the breeds’ physical features, I began researching more information about Greyhound racing in regional Orlando. In doing so I learned of an organization called Greyhound Pets of America Greater Orlando, located in close proximity to a race track near my home. I visited, met owners and caretakers of Greyhounds and asked permission to take photo references for a series of paintings.
The first image in response to the Greyhounds was the painting *Two Dogs*. My goal was to reflect my experience of observing and learning about the animals and also to create and capture an individualistic sense of identity in them, to separate the dogs I had seen from a more general usage of an animal figure in an image symbolically representing its species. The final work consists of two dogs turning towards each other with their heads in a lowered positioned in
front of a deconstructed environment of vertical lines that act as windows, exposing marks and layers of paint in which context has been obscured by the continued physical process of the painting.

Figure 3 Two Dogs 2017. Painted and photographed by the author in 2017.
These vertical windows were an extrapolation of a series of incidental marks in a painting preceding *Two Dogs*, called *Allyson*. In the image, a woman is positioned in the foreground and bottom third of the composition, facing the viewer with her back against a wood fence. Behind the fence is a flat grey background that flattens the space, broken up by six vertical windows, through which the viewer can see parts of an object, rendering it mostly unidentifiable. In *Allyson*, the windows were intended as an underpainting; a placeholder that would let me build structures behind the figure. During the completion of the painting I found the windows to be more effective as a minimalized representation of the vertical lines that make up the basic simplified structure of a landscape or environment. It also creates a visual allusion to my interest in creating the image in the first place. It suggests the psychology and emotion of the central figure observed from the outside in, rendering the specifics of the person’s inner life and thoughts unclear to the viewer except through an interpretation of subjective guess work. It invites projection by the viewer onto the woman in the foreground, with the real internal content obscured and imprisoned in the background of the composition, hidden from view and comprehension.
Figure 4 *Allyson*, 2017. Painted and photographed by the author in 2017.
The photographer Elsa Dorfman, who records large portrait photographs using mostly large-scale Polaroid formats, also observes and understands her subjects from the outside in. In the Errol Morris directed documentary *The B-Side*, which functions as a retrospective on her career, Dorfman says that she is interested in the surfaces of people, of their skin, of their clothing. Morris, a longtime friend of Dorfman’s, describes her main accomplishment as capturing the subjects’ act of self-presentation. “Here we are asked to deal with the endless discrepancy between how people see themselves and who or what they really might be” (Hoffman).

Much of Dorfman’s portraiture work taken with her large scale Polaroid camera consists of individuals or groups of people, often families, who assemble in front of a neutral backdrop to pose for the picture. They smile, placing their arms around each other, sometimes holding their pets in the photo with them. In contrast to this pattern and process, some of Dorfman’s work, notably in portraits taken of the writer Allen Ginsberg, features the subject squaring off with the camera lens, standing or sitting up straight, and offering Dorfman and her camera a neutral expression. While looking through these images of Ginsberg, I found myself being drawn into hypothetical assumptions about him. What does his expression really communicate about him and his feelings in the moment that is recorded, and what am I adding to it as the viewer? The contrivance of the pose is clear; Ginsberg or Dorfman or both are intent on using the neutrality and lack of information to suggest a kind of endless possibility of inner thought or feeling of the subject, but despite this I still find myself coming to a kind of instinctual conclusion of what Ginsberg is thinking in that split second of the shutter closing. These photographs share
similarities to the documentary photographic methodology used by photographers like Walker Evans, trying to quarantine the photographer into the role of a witness, mitigating the photographer’s hand in the information that is offered to the viewer. In Charlotte Cotton's book *The Photograph as Contemporary Art*, she describes similar methodologies as “the deadpan aesthetic” (Cotton, pg. 81).

This effect of a lack of understanding between the viewer and a portrait subject created by a lack of context and information was familiar to me from another photograph that I had studied previously. About eight years ago I traded one of my paintings to a man who was collecting outdated analog mug shots from police stations. In return for my work he offered me a “genuine antique” and I received an old yellow Kodak cardboard box that contained a mug shot of a black woman from 1950. Studying the woman in the image led to a series of assumptions and hypothetical conjecturing about her and her situation that fascinated me. I was interested in the woman and her life, but most of my questions about her were not answerable in any reliable way based on the actual image and the sparse typed information on the card surrounding the photograph, which stated that she was a waitress, 28 years old, 4 foot 9 inches tall, and that she was arrested for the being a “common prostitute”.
I became so interested in the feeling of frustrated alienation from the woman’s experience and personhood that I made a series of paintings repetitively depicting the woman’s image from the photo. By recording each and every part of the woman’s face in value and form, I hoped to gather some intangible knowledge or observation that would give me more insight into the woman and somehow uncover a small piece of her personal complexity. It ended in frustration.
Each of the iterations of the image looked like a different person altogether. It was like yearning to relate to Elvis Presley on an intimate personal level and resorting to interviews with a room of impersonators. I eventually moved to different imagery in my studio practice, but have always kept the image nearby out of sheer fascination and curiosity.

Figure 6 Untitled, 2014. Painted and photographed by the author in 2014.
In retrospect, these images that exemplify this barrier to interpretation and connection, the Ginsberg portraits, the mug shot, and *Allyson* are all images of people whose experiences exist across a cultural divide from my own. However well-intentioned my interest in understanding the inner life of a white woman, a gay man and a Jim Crow era black woman, the influence of western culture and my own limited world view separate my experience from theirs and prevent me from truly knowing. In *Allyson*, I wanted to create an image that conveys this idea and relate it to the physical act of painting from reference. The neutral expression creates a dead-end dialogue with the viewer, where the only option left is to read into the neutrality of the expression.

**Figure 7** *Untitled*, 2014. Painted and photographed by the author in 2014.
In *Psychology of Women Quarterly* Volume 21, objectification theory is defined as being treated as a body (or collection of body parts) valued predominantly for its use to (or consumption by) others (Fredrickson and Roberts pg. 2). The act of objectification by this definition separates the human being from their individuality and personhood. To say that Allyson, who I happen to be married to, is an intellectually and emotionally complex person would be a comical understatement. I think that I know her better than anyone in the world, but there are things about her life that I can never understand, because I am literally a white man. Even still, my knowledge and understanding of all the specific attributes that make up her personhood are being handicapped by the formal elements of the painting; her positioning, neutral expression, the color palette stripped down to a monotone greyscale, and the deconstructed landscape. In all these ways, any context necessary to knowing her has been removed. In the vertical windows behind the fence, hidden under flat grey paint, is enough information to register that something is there, but that information, is always out of reach.

The painting of Allyson is joined by two others, *Sue*, and *Barbara*, to form a series of paintings depicting three generations of women in my family. Sue is my mother and Barbara is my maternal grandmother, who died before we met. Both images formally follow *Allyson* in construction, and are meant to expand on the ideas in that painting.

Elsa Dorfman’s interest in what the subjects of her photographs try to look like as they are recorded by her camera is interesting in relationship and contrast to the work of Lucien Freud, an important 20th century figurative painter who focuses on painting his models with a strict observational methodology when recording the complexity of his subjects. In an interview
with Michael Aupling, former Chief Curator of the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Freud says, “What is credible to you may not be credible to me, if you know what I mean. I never put anything into a picture that I don’t actually see when I’m painting the subject. However, I’m not trying to make a copy of the person. I’m trying to relay something of who they are as a physical and emotional presence. I want the paint to work as flesh does. If you don’t over-direct your models and you focus on their physical presence, interesting things often happen. You find that you capture something about them that neither of you knew.” (Howgate 208-209) My process takes Lucien Freud’s idea of “seeing” slightly differently – it’s not only inherently visual, I try to use the process of painting to record some essential quality of the figure and landscape.

Freud also used his formal process to address themes of gender and objectification. In his painting *Standing in Rags*, Freud positions a nude female figure leaning or reclining in a large pile of white rags. The figure is painted to the same level of detail as the rags that enclose her, and he de-emphasizes her face, turning it to the side and darkening it, giving a sense of her body being seen as an object. Jess Sroga argues that this painting comments on a history of portraiture that positions women as objects to be looked at and desired. She argues that the detached and cold quality of Freud’s observation places the work in direct contrast to the traditional depiction of women in painting. A later work of Freud’s, *Two Men in the Studio* depicts a male figure, centered and dominating the composition. In the background, decorating the wall, is *Standing in Rags*. (Sroga et al)

More than a few of his paintings incorporate animals into the compositions. *In Sunny Morning-Eight Legs* and in *Eli and David*, the artist seems to treat the human and animal
subjects with equal importance, using the expressions and physicality of the dogs to strengthen the themes of mortal vulnerability.

In my series of Greyhound paintings, objectification is also present as a driving theme. By the Fredericks and Roberts definition of objectification theory, women are placed in a subhuman or animalistic position by the scrutinizing party. This places them in a context of transaction and commodification, which I wanted to draw parallels to with the greyhound figures. Greyhounds are a particularly commodified breed. Of the 18 Greyhound race tracks still operating in the US, more than half operate in Florida. Even though Greyhound racing has declined over the past twenty years, more than 500,000,000 dollars was gambled through race tracks in 2015. The economy of Greyhound racing drives systematic abusive practices. The dogs are often confined for more than 20 hours per day, in small cages, barely large enough for the average Greyhound to stand up and turn around in (Grey2K USA). More than 11,000 Greyhounds were injured and 909 racing Greyhounds were reported dead. The ASPCA qualifies this last statistic, stating that the number is likely higher, because there are no verifiable statistics on dogs that are disposed of each year after being deemed injured or non-competitive (ASPCA).

This pattern of seemingly emotionless detachment from the individualism and personalities of the dog’s standings in stark contrast to my experience visiting Greyhound Pets of America Greater Orlando. The caretakers I met were plainly protective of the dogs. I was interested enough in the prospect of adoption that I asked about it, but was quickly warned of the rigorous process of adoptive home placement. They explained to me the results of the racing dogs’ history on their behavior. They said that one must be careful opening a door directly in
front of a Greyhound, because it might instinctually bolt out and be lost. They cautioned me against dog parks, because small dogs could be momentarily mistaken for something to chase and be killed, like the bait that they chase around the tracks. Each dog I met had a name emblazoned on the collar, and the owners spoke of their personalities and how they thought they were feeling throughout the interaction. Where the Greyhound racing industry seemed to see the dogs as cogs in a machine, these people seemed to see them as almost human.

The topic of viewer detachment and objectification is addressed with some different formal techniques in the greyhound paintings. In opposition to the detached flat expression in Allyson, the dogs have pronounced, sometimes exaggerated emotional expressions, meant to draw the viewer to a conclusion about their inner emotion and feeling, shown in Untitled 1 (detail). Like Allyson, vertical windows show the history of the painting, under layers mostly covered by the grey background. Besides their function as a basic vertical construction of landscape, the vertical windows reveal a deep red color bleeding down the under layer of canvas. This is intended to give the viewer a sense of foreboding or violence. The detached human arms reference human interaction, but take the focus away from the human and on to the dog, who is the emotional focus of the painting.
Francis Bacon, a painter and friend of Freud’s, placed his deformed and heightened subjects into non-literal constructions of place in his work. In his 1953 painting Two Figures, the artist strips away the information of the room surrounding the central characters, reducing the space depicted in the painting into vertical and diagonal lines, delineating the limits of the space around the two figures and throwing them into sharper focus; like a black box theater, the background draws attention to the actors. In another painting, Study after Velazquez, Bacon surrounds and imprisons a screaming figure with rough vertical lines. The lines function as an
allusion to space, but also as an energetic formal treatment of a flat painted surface. The nature of the lines gives the viewer a disturbing feeling separated from the contextual purposes they also serve to the composition.

A defining aspect of Bacons work that is on display in *Two Figures* is a heightened, exaggerated sense of pain and terror conveyed through the figures in his images. *In Dog with Red Feet*, I was interested in using the anatomy of the Greyhound to create a sense of menace and foreboding. Started as a response to the three headed dog Cerberus in the novel *Dante’s Inferno*, *Dog with Red Feet* marked a clear separation in tone from the rest of the Greyhound series, and I am interested in expand on these differences in my studio practice.
Figure 9 Dog with Red Feet, 2017. Painted and photographed by the author in 2017.
POSTMORTEM

The questions that I am interested in asking as an artist are broader than the contemporary political conversation around the issues of race, gender and exploitation that aspects of the work touch on. While I admire and have respect for artists whose work is politically motivated, these are not the issues I’m grappling with. I have come to realize that these works are related not so much to their relationship to activism and regional context but to my ability to understand the observable world. From the moment that I received the mug shot discussed earlier in this paper, I have been fascinated by the frustrating feeling of the incomplete understanding of living things; of never being truly able to know or relate to anyone or anything whose experiences and worldview I do not share. This is what I believe ties the work together as a whole, and offers a direction to continue my work in the studio.

In addition to this, some formal elements of the work originated out of practicality. For example, my colorblindness originally dictated the use of grey scale in the work however it served the images well because it further removed complexity and context from the subject matter. Deconstructing the landscape and removing all unnecessary elements as well as rendering the aspects of the figures to essential levels of detail also serves to reduce the complexity of the subject. All of these formal and conceptual decisions visually communicate my incomplete understanding of the subject.

These applied restrictions honed and shaped the content and imagery, leading me to my current body of work after three years in the MFA program at UCF.
REFERENCES


