Pitiful Creatures

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PITIFUL CREATURES

by

SHAUN WIGHTMAN
B.F.A. University of Central Florida, 2004

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Studio Art and the Computer in the Department of Art in the College of Arts and Humanities at the University of Central Florida Orlando, Florida

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ABSTRACT

By focusing on character, humor, and loose narrative, I create a world full of quirky, pitiful creatures that blur the lines between illustration and "Fine Art". Inspired by golden age cartoons, Pop-Surrealism, and late 50's commercial art, I make work that speaks of the awkwardness of human emotion while keeping a "tongue in cheek" attitude about everyday life. This work is expressed through illustration, animation, sculpture, and a lot of sarcasm.
To my cat, The Pope
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In no particular order, I would like to acknowledge the following for their wisdom, support, and professionalism:

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INTRODUCTION

“Mix a little folly with your wisdom, a little nonsense is pleasant now and then.”

- Horace
CHAPTER 1: HARVEST GOLD UPBRINGINGS

I grew up in a house that to this day still has "harvest gold" appliances. The decor is for lack of a better term, African in origin. Spears, masks, and drums were completely normal to me throughout my upbringing. This house is located in the beachside city of Stuart, Florida, “The Sailfish Capital of The World”. Stuart’s art community thrived on Jimmy Buffet inspired art rife with sailboats, palm trees, and of course the obligatory manatee with neon pink ray-ban sunglasses. Needless to say, this art community wasn't a huge point of interest in my growing up.

The majority of my inspiration comes from the place where most children get theirs from... cartoons and MTV.

I aspired to be an animator since the age of 10. My plan at that time was to start in comics, get popular, create cartoons of my comic characters, enjoy eternal glory. It had worked for Charles Schultz, Matt Groening, and Jim Davis... why not me? I started creating re-occurring characters. I had a rabbit and a turtle... now thinking back not the most original pair up... but hey I was 10.
By the time I was in high school I had abandoned my old style for a new one, anime. This is what I could consider a dark age for my artistic development. Drawing primarily pre-existing characters from shows I was interested in, I lost all forms of originality and identity. I made a promise to myself that this style would die when I went into college. College was where people step up and start thinking for themselves. Boy, was I wrong.
CHAPTER 2: WELCOME FRESHMEN

My six years in undergrad were (for the most part) liberal excursions into mediocrity. That’s not to say that I had bad instructors or pointless classes, on the contrary I believe that my classes were brilliant. I learned so much about technique, but I personally didn’t make any work that I could consider “mine” or would want to show others after taking the class. I also took lots of classes in humanities and anthropology (almost fulfilling a minor in both by happenstance) thus “padding” my undergraduate experience as stated earlier. I never did poorly in my studio classes, usually got A’s on everything I did, just nothing I could truly claim as my own. This all changed when I took my first sculpture class.

My instructor was Jim Casey, an industrial sculptor responsible for the "Tree of Life" at Disney's Animal Kingdom. His personal work related to the human form in wood and gauze. At the time, I was an avid action figure collector and was highly interested in creating sculptures with as many points of articulation as possible. He turned me on to "Scarecrow" building. My goal was to make a fully articulated life-size humanoid. I wanted him to be as minimal as possible so the articulation would become the most important trait. I created 2 scarecrows, one static and one kinetic.

The static scarecrow was created over a summer; it had roughly 32 points of articulation and could stand on its own. Every joint was secured with butterfly
screws so it could be securely posed in countless positions, every finger was fully articulated. Alas, the sculpture didn't survive long enough to take a picture of it completed; it was stolen from the sculpture studio the same summer. This is the only picture.

Figure 2: Scarecrow

The kinetic scarecrow dangled on a traditional scarecrow cross, and had a handle coming out of its back. You could shake the handle and its limbs would rattle around.

Up till that point Play-Doh was the closest thing I came to sculpture. That sculpture class changed my world. I started working in wood and fell in love with
the medium. I would spend every chance I could get working on my sculptures.
I started creating sculptures that were reminiscent of children's wooden toys. I
created very colorfully painted wooden rockets and boats. Everything was
painted in primary colors and all were adorned with a swirl design. This design
resurfaced many years later as a very important trait in my current work. For the
first time, I actually felt like I was creating something tangible, something I could
honestly call art.
Figure 3: Rocket
CHAPTER 3: ANIMATION BFA

Around this time I was accepted into the animation department. Through contacts, I got a job working for the biology department on a simulation. This simulation was an interactive long leaf pine forest for an installation at the Orlando Science Center. Honestly, I can say that this project was completely inconsistent to my current body of work aside from one thing. It led me to meet the most influential person in my education, Donald Seegmiller.

I met Don Seegmiller at the Game Developer's Conference in San Francisco of 2005. He was teaching a creature creation and design workshop that year and I thought it would be a fun class to take. This workshop flipped my life around. It made me realize that I was on the wrong track in the 3d animation world. I had been focusing so hard on learning any software application I could get my hands on. My true love was character based illustration, and Don Seegmiller helped me remember that.

With my newfound distain for working in CG intact, I got together with a handful of likeminded people in the animation department to make a stop motion animated film. This was exactly what I needed. It was animation and traditional sculpture combined; the best of both worlds. This film was created for the summer 2005 workshop class, which was six weeks long. My job was to physically create and animate the main character.
The film’s story was about a depressed character (whom we playfully nicknamed "Milton") sick of his daily routine. Every morning he would get up eat breakfast and put on his black tie and presumably go to work. This changed one day when he spotted a butterfly, and followed it into the woods. These woods were brilliantly colored and awe inspiring. As Milton first explored his surroundings he was excited, but soon he realized that there was more to his environs. Slowly the forest started to bend and creek toward Milton. He became scared and started to run to back the path, the trees uprooted themselves and gave chase. Milton eventually gets thrown into a hole where he mysteriously reappears in his room. Bewildered he wonders if he had been to a forest at all. The next morning as he wakes up he picks up a box instead of his typical black tie, he opens the box and is filled with a warm red light. The content of this box is a red tie, Milton puts it on, smiles, and the movie fades to credits. Presumably, Milton realizes that his life isn't so bad after all and decides to enjoy what he has. Making this film was easily the best experience I had in undergrad. The film was featured in the Miami Short Film Festival the following year where it was nominated for "Best Animated Short".
I continued to shirk 3D graphics my final year in undergrad, and focused my attention to character creation and design. At that time I was working as the art director of an “edutainment” video game for the Biology Department. This further soured my interest in working with traditional 3D.

During the time of my graduation I became interested in vinyl toys. Being a toy collector I came across them through toy conventions. Doing more research I became interested in the culture surrounding vinyl toys. This is what turned me onto the Los Angeles art scene.
CHAPTER 4: MFA FREEDOM

When I started grad school I was really interested in creating my own line of toys, immediately. I began designing the Cube-Kins, small resin toys with an articulated head. These toys were meant to be given unpainted to people so they could customize them with their own paint jobs and accessories. Although this was a good idea in theory, both my mold making and painting skills needed a lot of work.

Figure 5: Cubekins

At this time, I began development of another stop motion film. I created a lighthearted story of two characters named Lenny and Rock-boy who meet and eventually become friends. Lenny was an orange lizard that was reminiscent of Jeff Smith's "Bone" or Walt Kelly's "Pogo". Rock-Boy was well.... a rock, and an
ill tempered rock at that. Basically, Rock-Boy would be the "straight man" in the
duo keeping Lenny's slapstick antics at bay.

The challenge of producing a film of this magnitude continues to this day. The
medium changed from stop motion to 3D CG film, then to a 2D Flash film.
Ultimately, this film is a stop motion film and I fully intend to finish it in this
medium.

Figure 6: Lenny and Rock-Boy

At the same time I was still interested in the customization of vinyl toys. These
figures created by other designers were a good medium to improve my painting
I wanted to create something that was between design and character with these vinyl toys. I decided to come back to the swirl design that I was using on my wood sculpture years ago. Its Greek key/Japanese cloud shape was something that had put onto 3D surfaces before and seemed to fit in with the aesthetic I was going for. Still struggling with brushwork and cleanness, I decided to break up the linework with a black white black line, this created 3 lines moving black white black, these lines were further disrupted by a series of dots and dashes. This would maintain the semblance of a clean line without the precision. The colors were really flat and bright, very similar to my wood sculptures. These customs did fairly well in the vinyl scene. I became part of an online message board for vinyl enthusiasts. There, I received feedback and really got my name out, sort of... My screen name on the message board is Shaunmadeus a composite of Shaun and Amadeus, also spelling out "Shaun made us". This name stuck with my vinyl work and is what I've been credited by in various vinyl shows and publications. I am still very active in the message board, and it one of the best ways to get in contact with me. The majority of commissions and shows I've done have been through people contacting me through the message board.
I didn't want to be pigeonholed into creating just vinyl customs, so I started working on more 2D work. I designed characters based off of the initial sketch for my Bill-O Munny from the 2nd Uberbot Munny Show, an art show consisting only of customized Kidrobot Munny vinyl figures. Bill-O was a crime fighting superhero and had an idiot sidekick named Gus-T. Both names having obvious ties to wind which related to the swirl design on their heads and costumes. These served more as a refresher into Adobe Illustrator than anything else.

I also created a character called Rocket Pig, a blue pig based off of a blue piggy bank that I've owned for years, that travels throughout space by his flatulence. This was done in marker on bristol and didn't turn out as well as I wanted, so I filed it away for later.
While teaching my 3D Design class one of my students purchased a phenol-based resin computer board from a local electronic surplus store. It had a tactile surface that I thought would be interesting to paint. That same day I went to the store and bought 10 different boards to paint. I knew that I wanted to do something having to do with internet culture.

![Figure 8: WTFBBQ!!!!1!one!!](image)

I decided to make a computer "bug", an anomaly that would reside in a computer and reek havoc on the system, much like a gremlin. I thought it would be funny to have it speak in "leet" or "1337" or "I33t" speak, an internet form of conversation where letters and numbers are exchanged and grammar and abbreviation run rampant. This 21st century language was developed though condensing speech for online chatting, and quick comebacks during online gaming. This language is supposed to sound ridiculous and silly. I wanted this character to be of very limited intelligence so this idiotic internet language was a
perfect match. I made the word bubble so large that there was no mistake of the inflection. The title of the piece "WTFBBQ!!!!1!one!!" has the addition of the exclamation marks to further push the internet speak. These exclamation marks are littered with 1’s, a common mistake of someone releasing the shift key while trying to make an exclamation mark. The physical word one further pushes this into absurdity. I really enjoyed this piece and want to touch back on it, possibly making a series of computer nuisances.

Around the beginning of 2007 I was asked to be part of the FX Show a toy and comic convention, by an art group calling themselves “Me Llamo Jellyfish”. I was going to show off my customs, but also wanted something that I could make quick multiples of to sell, so I decided to make a print. I wanted to make something completely random and absurd.

![Figure 9: TAXIDERMY!](image-url)
Nothing was more random or absurd than a taxidermied fish screaming "TAXIDERMY!". I decided to pick a semi retro color scheme with blues, browns, and greens, to give it the look of being on a wall in a late 1950's early 1960's house. I decided on a vector image for the easy replication and general "cleanness" of the line. This became the first piece to abandon the dashed line I was relying so much on. This design wasn't as well received at the show as I would have wanted, but was picked up by a vinyl store in Ft. Lauderdale, FL where it has done very well.

I also decided to print out a design I pitched to an independent t-shirt manufacturer. It was shot down by the owner so it was fair game. The piece was titled "It's Raining Cats And Dogma" and quickly became my most popular design and quite possibly the most important character in my current work.

The Pope Cat

In the summer of 2005 I got a cat. He was a bit too spirited so I adopted a second cat to keep him in check. When naming this second cat something amazing happened. I wanted to name him something completely ridiculous; I decided to name my cat The Pope. I found it amusing for anyone who was eavesdropping in my conversation about The Pope. For example, "Man, I had the hardest time falling to sleep last night. The Pope kept biting my feet all night." After a while I realized that this amazing combination had more potential.
After about a year with The Pope I was asked to make a t-shirt design for an up
an up and coming clothing label. I was told this was a limited edition shirt from
their “Artist Series” and I would have complete artistic freedom with the design. I
was trying to figure out something to design when I looked on top of my monitor
and there was The Pope staring down at me. At that moment it all came
together, I quickly jotted something down on a blank sheet of computer paper
and viola, “It’s Raining Cats And Dogma”. This image had The Pope, with a
Pope Hat, sitting under a cloud that’s raining on him. The rain was made up of
Morse code that stated “It’s Raining Cats And Dogma”. I had previously used
dots and dashes before in my work but for the first time I decided to make them
mean something. Morse code had an importance to me ever since one of my
friends got into a very serious car accident. He barely made it through the crash
and the extent of his injuries rendered him unable to talk for months. The only
way he communicated was through tapping on a table in Morse code, something
his grandfather had taught him when he was a kid. This strive to communicate
really moved me, and I’m glad for the opportunity to use it in a piece. Needless
to say, I thought that the t-shirt company would really get a kick out of the idea. I
quote them as saying, “Eh… It’s just a cat in a Pope hat”, and with that I had
complete freedom to use it as I wished. This was the first character I created that
seemed to have enough of a presence to be reoccurring. It has since become
my personal mascot and the subject to several pieces.
Figure 10: It's Raining Cats And Dogma
Figure 11: Pope Cat
Figure 12: Up Close And Papal
The Grue

One night I had a dream that I was in a cave. In this cave was a small creature that inhabited rocks. Basically it was a small ghost that would use the rock to become its physical body. In the dream this character was called a Grue. When I woke up I immediately sketched out what I was dreaming. Basically the Grues were creatures that remind me of starter enemies from Japanese role playing video games. These non threatening monsters would basically pose no harm to your character and would help you become acclimated with the fighting system of the game. So thinking further upon the idea of the Grue being a frail easily killed enemy I wanted to show what happened to him to make him a ghost. In my dream the Grues were little yellow paisley shaped ghosts. I wanted to visualize what the Grues would look like before death. This is where the pill shaped Grue originated. My first painting of the Grue was “Cold Cuts”, this painting depicts the exact moment of the Grue’s unsightly demise. The Grue was split into three pieces and was painted on three canvases; I always enjoyed the classic cartoon device of when a character gets cut in half, the only bone structure is the singular “ham-bone” in the middle.
Figure 13: Cold Cuts
Getting the death of the Grue out of the way I was free to paint him in his true form. I wanted to create the moment after the Grue’s death. This next painting “The Grue” was drawing off of the fear of death and the afterlife. It shows a Grue in a vacuous space looking cautiously into the void.

![Figure 14: The Grue](image)

**Other Works**

As possibly mentioned before, I don’t keep a sketchbook. I’ve tried and tried to keep one but it never works out. My sketches are on whatever is closest to me when I come up with an idea. I usually don’t rethink an idea when I sketch it down, that tiny scribble usually ends up being the image I transfer onto canvas. One day I was rummaging around in a stack of computer paper I had underneath
my desk I found a quick sketch of my Siamese cat Alfador. You know, it’s really funny that something so fleeting at the time can become really interesting upon second look. As soon as I saw it I sketched it onto a canvas and began painting. I especially like the color choices in this painting. The cyan and ochre really have a nice contrast, and the “rising sun” rays are reminiscent of animation character cards that show which character is featured in a cartoon. The title “If You Don’t Please” is a nod to Walt Disney’s Lady And The Tramp.

Figure 15: If You Don’t Please
Around this time I thought I was at a level where I could create a more satisfying Rocket Pig Painting. I was interested in experimenting with creating a physical environment for my characters to exist in. Rocket Pig was a pig of the future, and what better a way to show futuristic than to give it a late 50’s early 60’s retro feel. I made sure my color pallet was fitting for the time and peppered my image with retro “chatskies” and starbursts. This is also the only painting where I really play with environment depth, as Rocket Pig’s flatulence trail comes from behind a planet and in front of another. Whilst I was painting this piece I kept getting Elton John’s song Rocket Man out of my head. Of course, when I was singing it was always “Rocket Pig” instead of “Rocket Man”. I decided to title the piece “Oh, No No No I’m A Rocket Pig. Rocket Pig, Burning Out His Fuse Up Here Alone.” This being the chorus from Rocket Man, I thought it was a ridiculously long name for a ridiculously long piece.

Figure 16: Oh, No No No I’m A Rocket Pig. Rocket Pig, Burning Out His Fuse Up Here Alone.

I liked the way the “Cold Cuts” piece worked so well, I decided to create another split piece. This piece had a very annoying looking dog cut in half. This dog still
had the cartoony “hambone” from “Cold Cuts”, but had more of an edge to it because it wasn’t a completely made up animal. This piece symbolizes the yippy dog that lives next to your home, that you can’t help but cut in half. Well, at least in effigy I mean. Furthermore, this is the only piece that has a name that I’m not completely comfortable with, “Hush Puppy” is a little dark for my taste, but I believe that it adds to the piece.

Figure 17: Hush Puppy
CHAPTER 5: WHY I DO IT

Being influenced by cartoons as much as I am it isn't much of a surprise that my work relies heavily on character. I wouldn't say that my characters are based off of pop culture as much as existing on the outskirts of pop culture. By creating re-occurring characters I'm shoe horning them into pop culture. Instead of using a pre-existing character such as Mickey Mouse or Yogi Bear I'm ushering in a new gang of characters. These characters are individuals that have their own personalities and back stories. This makes them tangible to me.

The line quality of my illustrations has a sensibility of digital illustration. My characters have a very stark black outline that is thicker around the perimeter of the character. The internal lines are kept thinner. This technique is one that I've always admired about digital illustration. Ironically, I believe that digital painting is one of the chief downfalls of traditional two-dimensional animations. The majority are digitally painted, giving a very even, mechanical quality. I miss the day of the one cell mistake. I remember this was a common occurrence in old Hannah-Barberra cartoons. Gone are the days of hand painted cells, where an object was mispainted by the cell painter in just one frame. This would, for a split second make Scooby-Doo misplace his trademark spots or possibly give shaggy blonde hair. These mishaps were fairly common and added to the hand crafted feel that old cell animation has. I also believe that the cell acrylic colors have a "warmer" sensibility than digital exploits. It may be the fact that these paints are applied to clear cells and then backlit before exposed to film. One reason that I
physically paint my illustrations is to make sure that my paintings have a tactile feel. I, respecting the cleanness of digital art, try to achieve the smoothest most consistent linework when "inking" my paintings. Any inconsistencies that may occur are welcomed and help give the work more personality.

The modeled surface that I create in my paintings comes from my background in sculpture. The techniques that I use are ones usually associated with painting three-dimensional surfaces. First I start with a black background. Then I incrementally drybrush lighter colors until I get the volumetric effect that satisfies me. This not only gives my painting texture it gives it a sense of depth.

Humor is an important part of my work. I've always been drawn to "clever" work, something with an interesting pun, or social commentary. The characters themselves that I create hold a humorous quality to them. They are so pitiful or ridiculous that you can't help but be amused. Another way that I try to instill my work with humor is in the titles, titles such as “It’s Raining Cats And Dogma” or “Oh, No No No I’m a Rocket Pig. Rocket Pig, Burning Out His Fuse Out Here Alone” plays off of familiar expressions or song titles. I believe that humor helps people create a connection with the work.
In conclusion, I’ve always strived to find myself in my art. Throughout my life and education I have always been trying really hard to find “my style” and to make “Art”. When I decided to go to grad school I wanted to find that style so badly. It took me almost two years to discover that you cannot push something like that on yourself. You have to let go of the goal and focus on making work that you personally enjoy. Only then I started making work that I finally considered “Art”. I think that’s true for a lot of artists and art lovers. People get so caught up with what “Art” is or what “Art” means they get lost in it. Art should be enjoyable, enjoyable to make, enjoyable to share, and sometimes that’s enough.
REFERENCES

