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## Changing the Channel: A Study of Agenda, Immersion and Social Commentary in Art

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CHANGING THE CHANNEL: A STUDY OF AGENDA, IMMERSION AND SOCIAL  
COMMENTARY IN ART

by

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B.F.A. University of Central Florida, 2016

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts  
in the School of Visual Arts and Design  
in the College of Arts and Humanities  
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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis examines the concepts and ideas that pervade my body of work in painting. These concepts include immersion and scale, interactions in space, harmony and disunity, flat and dimensional space and perhaps most importantly, ambiguity. I intentionally use these formal devices to create immersive environments that appear as a familiar but skewed version of reality. By forcing together disparate languages of visual representation into the theoretical space of a painting, I strive to expose some of the humor and decay of our social institutions. In using the format of collage, my paintings have the opportunity to incorporate a wide array of iconography and imagery, while adding commentary through their juxtapositions. This thesis further explores the notion of oversaturation of images in media and how it has resulted in a clashing of imagery in the public space, akin to the format of collage in art-making. By using more easily readable or accessible iconography like cartoons or digital images to draw viewers in to the work on a visceral level, I discuss how the audience becomes witness to something sinister or something in the process of decay. Since I do not fully understand my own position as an artist and consumer of images, painting serves as a way to examine and question my relationship to society and culture as a whole. The artworks are inevitably questions in themselves: Who is to blame? What does it mean to be American? What is my duty as an artist?

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES .....	iv
INTRODUCTION .....	1
CHAPTER I.....	3
Motive and Agenda .....	3
Social Commentary .....	4
Artistic Perspective and Collage .....	6
CHAPTER II.....	9
Oversaturation of Imagery .....	9
Cartoons and the Range of Visual Language .....	10
News and Media Influence.....	12
CHAPTER III .....	15
Honesty of the Landscape .....	15
Contextual Meaning Through Visual Relationships .....	19
The Failures of Language.....	20
CONCLUSION.....	24
LIST OF REFERENCES .....	26

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Parts for a Rube Goldberg Machine, 60"x60", Acrylic on canvas, Nick Kalembo 2016	2
Figure 2: Black No.1, 48"x60", Acrylic on Canvas, Nick Kalembo 2015.....	5
Figure 3: Pest Control No.1, 60"x60", Acrylic on canvas, Nick Kalembo 2016.....	6
Figure 4: En Morn, Kurt Schwitters 1947 .....	8
Figure 5: Um. Like. Whatever., 60"x90", Acrylic on canvas, Nick Kalembo 2018.....	10
Figure 6: Still from Fantasmagorie, Emile Cohl 1908.....	11
Figure 7: The Oxygen Thieves, 60"x96", Acrylic on canvas, Nick Kalembo 2019 .....	14
Figure 8: Under an Off-Ramp from the George Washington Bridge, Oil on canvas, Rackstraw Downes 2011 .....	16
Figure 9: Fleischer Studios Characters, Fleischer Studios circa 1940.....	17
Figure 10: Corporal Funishment, 60"x92", Acrylic on canvas, Nick Kalembo 2018.....	19
Figure 11: Thoughts and Prayers, 60"x96", Acrylic on canvas, Nick Kalembo 2018.....	22

## INTRODUCTION

First and foremost I am a creator, a builder, a maker. I love to work with my hands and I find joy in the act of assembly and toiling over tasks for extended periods of time. I was the type of child who was interested in taking apart their toys and electronics, studying them and seeing if I could reassemble them. I'm not bothered by repetitive tasks and even find some peace in the act of them, much akin to the process of brick-laying that my Polish ancestors are notoriously known for. I often use family history and common history to gauge my goals and experiences, especially within the act of art-making. I have both a sense of reverence and uneasiness when it comes to our collective relationship with history. Because of my connection to the past, I've been very interested in this idea of "restoring" antiques and vintage objects. I find it extremely exciting to have a pile of seemingly useless parts that I have to study and understand in order to assemble them into something new, that, in a way transcends their usefulness as just parts. I carry this process into my practice of art-making by taking something discarded or forgotten and transforming it; reinvigorating it with new meaning, giving it new usefulness and new life.

Often, because of this strong emotional connection I have to the past, I find myself questioning my role and responsibilities as an artist. This inevitably leads me to examine the lineage of artists who have used art as a catalyst for social change or at the very least social commentary. The idea of holding a mirror to myself and society is what I consider perhaps the most noble cause of a painter.

My connection to the past and history, whether that's personal history or world history, leads me to always be questioning my role as an artist. In particular, I'm interested in questioning how I fit into the continuum of art-making, and how history influences my art. One

of my early paintings titled *Parts for a Rube Goldberg Machine* shown in Figure 1, was attempting to create a scale by which I could measure my relationship with the past against my own agenda as a painter. I examined my family history, based highly in Military service, and the back-breaking labor that was all too common only a generation ago. I formulated this metaphoric scale in order to search for a noble cause within the act of painting; a search that would come to inform much of my work.



Figure 1: *Parts for a Rube Goldberg Machine*, 60"x60", Acrylic on canvas, Nick Kalembo 2016

# CHAPTER I

## Motive and Agenda

Being someone who grew up during the 1980's and 90's, at the culmination of homogenized media, I was always being bombarded by film and television, cartoons, the news, and video games. Because of this I recognized early on that there is often a motive behind the act of image making. For example, advertising imagery has this distinct agenda to capture attention and sell an idea or a product, in some ways a similar agenda to that of the artist. Many of the same tactics that advertising uses to capture our attention are hijacked from fine-art. Color, repetition, composition, and symbolism are vehicles that when used effectively, work to captivate us as viewers. Similarly, this concept is mirrored in news media, where headlines must have an equally attention-grabbing effect.

Because of that extreme oversaturation of media and the idea of motive or agenda, I found myself sifting through media of all types, trying to find things that were uncommon and ultimately felt more real or truthful, essentially the jewels hidden among the rubble. To me these hidden jewels were things that most people discarded as too cryptic, strange, or macabre. But because I found these things difficult to define and pin down with meaning, they were in turn exceedingly more intriguing and interesting to me. I believe any great work of art will foster an air of mystery, as there's often a degree of magic in every mystery. So, naturally at a young age, the idea of the cryptic and the macabre became increasingly influential.

I believe that as a result of the oversaturation of images in contemporary media, and the inherent shortcomings of language itself, the inability we have to communicate with one another has grown exponentially. As consumers of these images, I believe it is becoming increasingly



difficult for us to navigate the waters of imagery in the public domain and to mine for meaning within those images. This navigation of meaning is mirrored in the ways I construct my own work, resulting in paintings that pose questions and debates to the viewer like: “What exactly is going on here?” I’m interested in questioning that motive behind imagery, both as I perceive it from media and in my position as a creator of imagery in painting. The Romanian psychologist, Ursula Schiopu, who contributed to the psychological understanding of peace, war and terrorism, observes:

“The work of art creates a bridge between one who possesses the ability to create and the man who contemplates the work of art.”

Within my practice of art-making, I find myself questioning exactly what type of bridge my paintings conjure. Is it a bridge that provides viewers with a clear and direct path from intention to reception, or one that is fraught with holes, layers and mysteries that lead viewers down a journey of poetry and discovery?

### **Social Commentary**

In my paintings I have explored ideas of social commentary. I believe it is a privilege afforded to artists who have rhetorical means to comment on issues in society. This has been a duty shared by artists throughout history, from Jonathan Swift’s bitter social commentary in *A Modest Proposal*, to Van Gogh’s *Potato Eaters* and even into contemporary street art. In my earliest work, I was almost exclusively interested in finding a way to provide commentary with the landscape or figurative elements in their most pure form. In other words, I composed paintings based on direct observation from traditional linear perspective; as things actually existed in my immediate surroundings and perceived by my eyes. By observing the way

landscapes and figures parallel the society that produced them, I found I was able to examine and question that society in my paintings. Two of the most successful examples of this are the paintings *Black No.1* shown in Figure 2 and *Pest Control No.1* shown in Figure 3.



*Figure 2: Black No.1, 48"x60", Acrylic on Canvas, Nick Kalembo 2015*



*Figure 3: Pest Control No.1, 60"x60", Acrylic on canvas, Nick Kalembo 2016*

### **Artistic Perspective and Collage**

These paintings tie together my own perspective as a painter, one who constructs images, and the outward disconnect I have with those social institutions. In particular, *Pest Control No.1* as shown in Figure 3, is interested in the disconnection between nationalism and internal decay. What appears to be an upper-class home is presented shrouded in a vaguely flag-like covering. With my own experience in the South, I know this covering is commonly used as a way to

exterminate a pest infestation. Something that I found simultaneously beautiful and painful was this contrast between outward appearances and unseen decay.

It became apparent to me that the quietness of these works were not saying enough about the urgency I felt being bombarded by imagery in my daily life; so the trajectory of the work began to more directly question those social institutions. This led me to begin a frantic layering of imagery in my paintings, in a way to mirror the oversaturation of disparate imagery I was so accustomed to from media; but also as a way to examine what I was visually consuming. The conceptual artist John Stezaker said of collage:

” Collage allows the opening up of conscious, which is very direct...its also a way of looking at what you are consuming all the time.”

I do not fully understand my own position as an artist and consumer of images, and painting serves as a way for me to examine and question my relationship to society and culture as a whole. Collage as a form of art was coined by the Cubists and comes from the French *colle* or “to glue,” and was continued by the Dadaists who began cutting and gluing photographs from magazines and advertising. The Dada artist Kurt Schwitters even called his collages “Merzbilders” combining the German words for commerce (*kommerz*) and pictures (*bilder*). By forcing together disparate imagery, new relationships could be formed within these pieces of art and the evolution of fine art deepened.

In my most recent body of work, I intentionally use formal devices to create immersive environments that appear as a familiar but skewed version of reality. By forcing together disparate languages of visual representation into the theoretical space of a painting, I strive to expose some of the humor and decay of our social institutions. Using the format of collage, my



paintings began to incorporate a wide array of iconography and imagery, while adding commentary through their juxtapositions.



<https://abstractcritical.com/article/schwitters-in-britain/index.html>

Figure 4: En Morn, Kurt Schwitters 1947

## CHAPTER II

### **Oversaturation of Imagery**

I find that this concept of psychic collage had continued to grow into the 1980's and 90's during my childhood, where I became accustomed to the violent and cartoonish images being thrust upon me by TV, video games and media as a whole. The sensation of flipping through TV channels and how they can synthesize with one another in our mind's eye is a feeling I wanted mirrored in my work. The first painting in my thesis body of work *Um. Like. Whatever.* shown in Figure 5, is a good example of how my work began to depart from the early paintings and to capture the feeling of "flipping through television channels."



*Figure 5: Um. Like. Whatever., 60"x90", Acrylic on canvas, Nick Kalembe 2018*

## **Cartoons and the Range of Visual Language**

With this increased oversaturation of images, the range of visual language has become widened to an extreme degree. The Polish sociologist and philosopher Zygmunt Bauman asserts:

“Contemporary society in the age of telematics is undergoing an inevitable pulverization of time and space. Immediacy and the need to satisfy urges become increasingly ephemeral.”

The feeling of immediacy and contradiction are concepts I find to be hallmarks of our society. While instant gratification may be an innately human condition, I find that some of our

notions about it as Americans came about with Industrialization. I believe there is a parallel between that growing immediacy of information and the advent of cartoon animation. During World War I, morale was high among Americans and camera crews often stayed in non-combat zones to show the happier, more upbeat side of war; specifically the widespread Nationalism and the sense of brotherhood that was being promoted in the armed forces that eventually trickled down into civilian life.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nyTYNZUd3hQ>

Figure 6: Still from *Fantasmagorie*, Emile Cohl 1908



## News and Media Influence

These stories of war journalism were shown as motion pictures in theaters, often following or proceeded by cartoons. This is another interesting parallel between that era of World War I America and contemporary American society that have informed, in part, my use of appropriated cartoon iconography. With the widespread use of photography and television becoming commonplace both in the US and worldwide, images of violence and oppression were also becoming commonplace. News networks strived to have the most exciting, dramatic and attractive stories. Skip ahead many decades and these images are being broadcast by news outlets in even more perverse ways, almost making them another form of entertainment. Presently, troubling images have become their own icons of entertainment through sensationalism. Although journalism in the true sense isn't to blame for this, in my opinion expressing ideas through imagery in news media is the culprit of sensationalism. Taking complex and nuanced ideas about war and reducing them to images and headlines makes people consuming those images into an audience. In 1985, the media theorist Neil Postman stated in his book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*:

“Our politics, religion, news, athletics, education and commerce have been transformed into congenial adjuncts of show business, largely without protest or even much popular notice. The result is that we are a people on the verge of amusing ourselves to death.”

A poignant and troubling example of these concepts can be found in my most recent painting *The Oxygen Thieves* as shown in Figure 7. The main reference photograph for this painting is one taken during the Charlottesville Unite the Right rally in 2018, where much violence and turmoil occurred. In the painting, there is a perpetual flipping between entertainment and violence. I hope that the piece operates in a way that draws viewers in with

the color, scale and imagery, perhaps expecting some sort of joke or humor, only to find themselves witness to something disturbing.



Figure 7: *The Oxygen Thieves*, 60"x96", Acrylic on canvas, Nick Kalemba 2019

## CHAPTER III

### Honesty of the Landscape

The thing I find interesting (and perverse) is the way both media and pop culture forgets these icons so quickly. Where do these icons and images end up? In some sort of cultural trash heap, in our collective psyche or somewhere in between? In my paintings, I aim to ponder this question, along with the layers of my own experience as a consumer of images, an American and most importantly, as a painter. Considering this need to examine my own agenda as a painter, I began to develop limitations in my studio practice. One of these limitations is to focus on mirroring popular culture. This took the form of layering entertainment imagery with gritty realism and by doing this, I'm able to create a dizzying and perverse sensation akin to the instant gratification of watching television. Another limitation comes from my past work with landscape painting, where I was intrigued by studying environments and landscapes from my immediate surroundings. Because these places seemed to lack the pretense or agenda I've been so interested in questioning, they were prime "real estate" to examine motive.

Much like the landscape painter Rackstraw Downes, I'm not interested in the Hudson River School Painters and their "escapist" view of landscape painting, but instead what he calls "disprized" scenes. Downes' paintings often reveal man's effect on landscapes and focus on a narrow range of his immediate surroundings; particularly a four-block range.



<https://www.painters-table.com/link/hyperallergic/rackstraw-downes-interview>

*Figure 8: Under an Off-Ramp from the George Washington Bridge, Oil on canvas, Rackstraw Downes 2011*

By painting landscapes from my immediate surroundings, I recognized the unabashed honesty of those places. I've been interested and inspired by spaces that were charged with history, and human presence, and thus became the perfect place to search for that honesty I mentioned before. The strength of this type of imagery has a stark contrast to the easily discarded, "throw-away" imagery in media and pop-culture. This notion of motive behind images informs my emotional response to them; in other words, the disprized landscapes have nothing to sell me or a viewer, they exist without pretense and are simply "real." Because I'm interested in contradictions and juxtapositions, I began searching for the perfect antithesis to this imagery and was lead to the cartoons of my childhood and the escapism they provided from reality.

In order to provide some of the most prototypical cartoon iconography, that with the most honest emotional response, I searched for the genesis of American animation. This occurred in the early 1920's through the 1960's and perhaps the poignant examples of it came from the



Florida-based Fleischer Brother's Studios. Whereas competitor animation studios, like Walt Disney, focused solely on anthropomorphic animals, Fleischer Studios most successful characters were humans. This link to humanism and the proto-iconic quality made Fleischer Studios imagery the perfect candidate to inject into paintings of social commentary.



[https://aminoapps.com/c/cartoon/page/blog/the-history-of-fleischer-studios/V0dU\\_7u4P0EwvOxn0eJzBerEMYjBbN](https://aminoapps.com/c/cartoon/page/blog/the-history-of-fleischer-studios/V0dU_7u4P0EwvOxn0eJzBerEMYjBbN)

Figure 9: Fleischer Studios Characters, Fleischer Studios circa 1940

By forcing together these icons of entertainment and honest realism, the contradictions that resulted inevitably lead to another level of cryptic-ness. Returning to the analogy of the bridge between artist and viewer, I was beginning to develop a language to describe the bridge and its path to viewers. The bridge functions as a way for me to speak both personally and universally, and elicit a conversation between artist and audience. The third element I inject into

these equations, one that I have always used in my paintings is the reference to the artist; references to myself. These take the form of my own body, and elements that serve as surrogates for myself. Much like the way I find myself trying to navigate media to find truth or meaning, I want viewers to battle with their own level of willingness to search for meaning in my paintings. I hope they find themselves immersed in a theoretical space that encompasses their understanding of images, painting, meanings and emotional responses they bring as viewers. The Romanian artist and psychologist Marinela Rusu has stated:

“Any artistic creation carries a coded message which gives to society complexity, depth and the possibility of developing new informational universes.”

The second painting in this series, titled *Corporal Punishment* and shown in Figure 10, continued to synthesize these elements into an increasingly coded message.



*Figure 10: Corporal Funishment, 60"x92", Acrylic on canvas, Nick Kalembo 2018*

### **Contextual Meaning Through Visual Relationships**

By exploring the intersection of disparate visual languages in my work, I hope viewers also consider their own position as consumers of imagery, and the difference between the word and the image. Semiotic theory suggests that the relationship between a sign, the object and its



meaning create a semiosis in the mind of an interpreter (or viewer in this case). This key relationship between symbol, object and person is what I'm interested in, and by using certain types of charged imagery and iconography, my paintings begin to create meaning through their discourse; both in the discourse between the imagery and the discourse among the audience. In some ways, I want viewers to have a similar experience with my work as when I create it; an experience where I find myself, again, questioning agenda or motive. I'm reluctant to expound on the specifics and even the outright meaning of my paintings because in a way, the image and the words that describe it are not mutually exclusive. What I'm trying to say is that I'm uncomfortable with the limitations of words, which is why I create images. Derrida's essay *Difference* highlights a number of heterogenous features that govern the creation of contextual meaning. The first of these features is the fact that words and signs can never really convey what they mean, but only gain definition through their reliance on additional words. The way meaning is "differed" through a seemingly endless chain of signifiers creates this inherent limitation I referred to before. Derrida further argues that because an interpreter's mental state differs from one "reading" of the text to another, and is constantly in flux, developing a general theory on any one "text" (in this case a painting) is impossible. To put it plainly, David Lynch has said about his films:

"As soon as you put things into words, no one sees the film in the same way... Talking... It's real dangerous."

### **The Failures of Language**

Language is inherently lacking when used as a tool of translation. To translate an image, a feeling or thought into a language that doesn't allow the same nuance or abstraction is simply fighting a losing battle. To take something suggestive and reduce it to something definitive is

the antithesis of my manifesto as an artist. The artist Robert Morris once wrote in his dream journal:

“the wall label disturbed my sleep. It grew to threatening proportions, entwined itself around me, babbled in my ear, wrapped itself over my eyes. It was a tangled, suffocating shroud of seething words in my dream.”

While I do have a strong reluctance to speak or write about specifics in my work, I am excited to speak about my creative process, which I’m sure you will find in this thesis. The writer Dennis Lim said, “to savor the thingness of words is to move away from their imprisoning nature.” In a way, the use of words in my paintings and in the writing that accompanies them is more interested in the sounds of the words, the puns they create or the implications of specific words. Two good examples of this use of language can be seen in the paintings *Pest Control No.1* shown in Figure 3 and *Thoughts and Prayers* shown in Figure 11.



Figure 11: *Thoughts and Prayers*, 60"x96", Acrylic on canvas, Nick Kalembo 2018

The words are vague yet direct in their overt meaning, but when read in conjunction with their surroundings they begin to lose their meaning and dissolve into the sounds they create in our mind or the relationships they create with paint. Again, they strive to pose more questions than to answer them.

Pedro Carolino's *English As She is Spoke* is a book that is notorious as an example of unintentional humor through the translation of Portuguese into English. This argument about the inherent lack of clarity in language is summed up most clearly in the quote: "It is difficult to enjoy well so much several languages." This line proves that conveying the accurate meaning of one language to another is impossible. While it may be referring to the literal translation of one language to another, I'm speaking about the reconfiguration of meaning as it travels from one state to another; thought to description, feeling to image, image to word, and even from one person to another. Post-structuralist theory purports that language as a medium is not transparent and doesn't connect one with "reality" or even "truth." Rather, language is a structure that derives meaning from the contrast of words or symbols and the relationships they create. Hence, my strong reluctance to prescribe one meaning to any of my works of art, instead focusing on the relationships created by forcing together specific symbols and signifiers. The artworks are questions in themselves: Who is to blame? What does it mean to be American? What is my duty as an artist?

## CONCLUSION

Formally, there are a number of concepts that I want to pervade my work. The most important of these are immersion and scale, interactions in space, harmony and disunity, flat and dimensional space and perhaps most important, ambiguity. In order to create a strong sense that the viewer can enter into this rhetorical space, I often use large-scale compositions that command observation and contemplation. Clearly, scale supports this immersion, and the sense of a large doorway, through which one can enter reinforces this. Immersion in my work is important in many ways, formally to draw viewers in at first glance, but also to provide a space or a vehicle for them to be encompassed by ideas and find themselves searching through the work. I think smaller paintings give the audience the opportunity to walk away quickly and not engage on a visceral level. The large scale I'm working with along with those formal techniques mentioned earlier (that advertising also uses), grabs viewers with a "gut reaction" and I hope causes them to be immersed in the environment, the imagery, the ideas and the painting as a whole. As opposed to the square format that many of my early works utilized, the vertical rectangle suggests that the paintings are entire worlds in themselves and should be entered into. As I mentioned before, the oversaturation of images in media has resulted in a clashing of imagery in the public space, akin to the format of collage in art-making. By using more easily readable or accessible iconography like cartoons or digital images to draw viewers in to the work on a visceral level, I then want them to become witness to something sinister or something in the process of rot and decay (similar to the disprized landscapes of Downes). This is why elements of the paintings must harmonize and contradict themselves within the picture plane. In other words, harmony and disharmony, like chaos and calm, must coexist to challenge perceptual and intellectual assumptions for myself and viewers.

Moving forward, with what I've learned from my past work, audience reaction, and this recent body of work, I have a renewed sense of freedom and agency to inject things into my paintings like: the macabre, our relationship with the past, the dizzying oversaturation of images that many of us experience, and my own point of view as an artist. In the end they all come together to form a cryptic and ambiguous narrative. I will always be sifting through these icons, symbols, and words pervading our image-based, oversaturated society and I think it's important to never lose who I really am: A creator, someone who finds solace working with their hands, and finds joy assembling the parts of a painting into something that transcends definability and strives to reveal the magic among the rubble.

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