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This Is Not a Dead Man

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NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

DOCUMENTATION OF THE ONE-PERSON EXHIBITION

A DOCUMENTATION OF THE ONE-PERSON EXHIBITION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE MASTER OF FINE ARTS SCHOOL OF ART

BY

KEVIN HUNTER

DEKALB, ILLINOIS

MAY 2019
Certification:  

In accordance with School of Art and Graduate School policies, this documentation is accepted in partial fulfillment of degree requirements.

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Chair, Graduate Advisory Committee

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Date
CATALOG

ONE-PERSON EXHIBITION

BY

KEVIN HUNTER

The following work is presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Fine Arts degree at Northern Illinois University. The work was produced between September 2018 and March 2019. It was presented in an exhibition from March 18-21, 2019 in the Jack and Jerry Johns Gallery 214, Visual Arts Building, Northern Illinois University – DeKalb, Illinois.

List of Work

1. Copy, Photocopy paper, 15’ x 16’, September 2018

2. Aphasia, Digital photography and text on photocopy paper, 6’ x 15’, October 2018

3. Self-portrait, Found objects, 8’ x 15’ x 6’, October 2018

4. Veil, Hand-cut Bristol paper, 80” x 56” x 1”, October 2018

5. Surveillance, Digital film, 6” x 9”, September 2018

6. Bread and Water, Kitchen island, bread and water, 34” x 48” x 24”, March 2019
This paper fulfills the requirements to fully document my solo exhibition, *This Is Not a Dead Man*.

**Artist Statement**

She held my hand

A crowd

I was shorter than the rest

They looked down at him

I looked down

And laughed

I am investigating his life

And always will be

I’ve gone back to visit

But he’s not there

**Intention**

My father died when I was four. I have two memories of him. The first: I was at my father’s bedside. I recall listening through the stethoscope. There was no heartbeat. The second: I was leaving for school. He bent down to give me a kiss. His rough beard made me pull away. I don’t know why I always recollect those memories in that order.

My understanding of my father remained static until I came upon some revealing documents while rummaging through my mother’s dimly lit basement. My wife was near. My mother was in the garden. An ominous cloud of confusion swept over me.
My father had committed an egregious act. Questions arose . . . and kept coming. How could he have done what he did? When did it really start? When did my mother find out? Why did I never find out? Has this always been a secret? Do others know? What do they know? Did he really change? Is forgiveness in the making; is that even my right to forgive? Am I any different? Will I stumble and fall as he did? Where do I go now? Should I remember? How can I escape the burden of exploration?

Something strange and unanticipated occurred as I explored my father’s belongings. I lost any sense of sympathy or tie to him as my father and began to simply view his tragedies as a distant story completely detached from my being. I was simply taking advantage of his misfortunes instead of honoring his rise through Hell. Have you ever watched a movie or a YouTube clip of violence or destruction from the comfort of your home? That is how I felt.

With renewed exertion, I viewed my investigation into my father’s past as a self-portrait he was painting with the few physical belongings he had left behind. Just enough to understand who he is and recount the story of his courage, endurance and faith.

Or is it my self-portrait, my father leaving behind physical evidence to perceive our deep connection and paralleling lives, our hearts and minds as one? Is he leading me through the Inferno and up to Paradiso to warn me of the treacheries that await me and plead with me to take another path?

Or is my work a self-portrait for you, the viewer? A natural result of my work is that a door is opened for the viewer to observe themselves through a transcendent lens. Rather than merely asking what I, the artist, mean by connecting unrelated objects of my past and present,
viewers can be vigilant about their own inspiration and understanding gained as they experience and observe.

It is through the quietest moments that the most phenomenal discoveries are obtained.

**Process**

An undeniable characteristic of my work is the performative aspect of researching, creating, thinking and feeling. The performance and ever-developing understanding occurs pre-, during and post-production. As I question my father’s intentions and meticulously cut out each letter of my interrogating questions to him through the veil I feel an ebb and flow of justice and mercy. It is the prolonged deciphering of my father’s confused words as I photocopy a copy of a copy of a copy. It is the deepening understanding of my brothers’ relationships with my father as I interview them about distant memories. It is the wisdom gained from metaphor as I cover the old found desk with a new layer of veil-like vellum. It is the revealing perspective of what my mother went through as I investigate her endless hoarding. It is the revealing clarity of who I am and what I want to become.

It is on the toilet where a necessary, mundane, human act allows for a brief moment to think of nothing else. It is in the shower where solitude, warmth and water create a recipe for intimate reflection. It is while commuting in which the mundane journey is transformed into a clear vision. It is cleansing. It is a brief interlude in the present to think for yourself. Author C.S. Lewis describes a similar transformative charge of inspiration. “It all comes and rushes at you
like wild animals in the morning.”. Philosopher Democritus states, “The truth is in the depths.”. I add to his words and declare the truth is in the depths of the mundane.

The spark comes so instantaneously but only after feeding the embers. So many of our ideas or hopes, etc. come and just as quickly die away. But without the effort of doing, the epiphany and moment when all is understood will never come.

My artwork, my family and my worship do not divide my time. They are one in the same. My work is developed through hours spent in the studio. Yet it is equally created in the spontaneous moments as I wake up in bed to discover a new light that shines through my curtains and warms the corner of my room. Inner reflection is the source of my inspiration. I don’t always know why my ideas come or why I engage in particular artworks. And I may never know. But there is an energy that propels me forward. And I must listen.

“Who can separate his faith from his actions or his belief from his occupations. Who can spread his hours and say this for god and this for myself? This for my soul and this other for my body.

…. Your daily life is your temple and your religion. Take with you your all.”

Materials

My works’ materials reveal who I am as an individual. I create with what resources I have. If I have push pins to complete an artwork, the material (push pins in this case) and I collaborate to satisfy both my economic and sustainability needs as a husband and father and the

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aesthetic needs of the material itself within the composition. Photocopies, print paper, Walmart picture frames, found objects within my studio space, donated electronics, a decaying piece of wood I found while playing in the field with my kids, my wife’s obsolete wedding dress (clearly with her permission). At other times, I may make the decision to purchase a low-cost prefabricated butcher block countertop island, online Polaroid film, exacto knife blades or gallery magnets. My decisions as an artist are not extreme in either direction; I, along with every human being, am provided the ability to choose for myself the correct balance between economic need, sustainability and aesthetics.

Just as light and sound interact with me even though I cannot always observe their presence, the objects and materials in my studio and I collaborate, mutually respecting one another’s strengths and weaknesses. The object takes the lead, while, at other times, I am at the helm. We understand and support each other.

Eva Hesse addresses her artistic interaction with material through a harmonious contradiction of declarations. First, “materials are lifeless til given shape by the creator.” Second, “materials by their own potential create their end.”

It is neither the human that is in control nor the object. Together, we create a symbiotic relationship that elevates both parties. ⁴

The physical or corporeal form is not what is significant; it is the interaction between the material’s and my spiritual matter that is significant. Author Caroline Myss explains that there is an energy force in the universe that brings things together with relational need. This is made

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possible by the connections between our spiritual elements, even within inanimate objects. A rock that seems to be static is, in fact, created of moving particles that are defined by the viewer as a distinct object because of their probability to act a certain way and move within a particular spatial frame. Yet, those minute particles, on a microscopic level, are moving with a certain amount of randomness and chance.

It is my firm belief that all things spiritual are physical and all things physical are spiritual. When universal elements interact with one another, their physical material, although it exists, may or may not be seen. But what is observed is feeling and understanding within their spiritual bodies. My photographic images printed on regular printer paper will decay and return back to the endless cycle of universal stardust. But the experiences and inspiration gained between my interaction with that object will remain a part of my spiritual self throughout eternity.

There is a connection between me and the material or object used in my artwork. Where does it come from? Why did it cross my path? Why this particular object and not another? How will it connect with my ever-developing rhizome of experiences? Even with these questions unanswered, I pick the twig up. What an interesting paradox. It is often said that we will bring nothing with us past the moment of death. Yet, God still provides “things” for us in this life to cling to. Physical mementos of our ancestors, physical elements of protection like a home and clothing. We realize the lifelessness of the material while, at the same time, we cannot deny our


connection with it. Just as light and sound truly exist even though we cannot always see their paths, there exists a distinct aesthetic and spiritual connection between artist and object. The object does not control the human and the human does not control the object. The power comes when both work together. Poet Henry David Thoreau, while sojourning in Concord, Massachusetts, developed a mutual understanding between himself and nature. Human and object do not need to live separately, one controlling the other. Indeed, we coexist, benefiting reciprocally. The object receiving new life by becoming elevated through art and the human by gaining a greater understanding of themselves and the world around them through metaphors and symbolism relating to the object.

**Influences**

Similar to contemporary art which appreciates potentially anything as art, I consider all of my experiences to be relational within my art process, creating a non-hierarchical and seemingly unrelated net of information and experiences that make me who I am.

*Dracula by Bram Stoker*

Author Bram Stoker influences my artwork through his thought-provoking phrases within his writings: “You must pass through the bitter water before you reach the sweet.” This philosophical comment, when observed with an open mind teaches a great deal of metaphorical understanding about my place within society and the universe as a whole. When Stoker includes “must” within his work, he is declaring a fact that is simply based on his single and unique

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perception. Yet, position can be understood by all who are willing to listen. Like Stoker’s words can touch millions, my artwork reaches beyond my personal experiences and spiritually connects with others who are open to seeing beyond the physical.”

*Roots by Imagine dragons*

“I’m goin’ back to my roots” is vocalist Dan Reynold’s focus in his song, *Roots*. “Had to lose my way to know which road to take. . . . Hell will always come before you grow.” Through my artwork and research, I delved into my father’s past. With only two original memories of my father, his life was a blank slate in my book. When I crept further into the hole of his past, I discovered I was walking straight into Dante’s Inferno. Hell was all around me. But as there is opposition in all things (scripture), with Hell comes Heaven. By experiencing the depths of despair, regret, anger and failure you can truly comprehend the joy of cleanliness, bliss, nostalgia and the appreciation of renewal. By going back to your roots, you can be capable of finding which way to go.”

*Felix Gonzales-Torres*

I look to Felix Gonzales-Torres as a source of finding deep understanding within an object that is most often overlooked and easily consumed. Gonzales-Torres uses two generic wall clocks, side-by-side to visualize what he is internally experiencing as his significant other and he, himself, die of AIDS. He leaves a pile of packaged hard candies in the empty corner of a


11 “Imagine Dragons - Roots (Official Music Video).” YouTube, YouTube, 29 Sept. 2015, www.youtube.com/watch?v=PscXGpsF3dY.
museum, allowing passersby to take and consume the candy, acting as a catalyst toward the death of Ross Laycock, Gonzales-Torres’s significant other.\footnote{“Felix Gonzalez-Torres.” SFMOMA, www.sfmoma.org/artist/Felix_Gonzalez-Torres/} 

\textit{Matthew Ritchie}

Artist Matthew Ritchie explains “We can only see 5% of the universe . . . We’re working from a model with 95% of the information missing - so no wonder everybody’s acting like they’re in the dark. So the big question for me is: how do you visually represent that absence?” Using mundane materials within my work stretches viewers to lose themselves within the simplicity of the material’s work, finding themselves transcended to an elevated level of intelligence and spirit.\footnote{Grosenick, Uta. \textit{Art Now!}: 2. Taschen.}

\textit{Bruce Nauman}

Artist Bruce Nauman’s video presents himself exploring ways in which his body can interact and relate to his studio walls and floor. Negative space is activated as he pierces its emptiness and creates new shape and vision. My artwork seeks to break boundaries set by society that declare what one can and cannot do. I seek to enlighten one’s understanding of what is possible, real, and right.\footnote{Nauman, Bruce. \textit{YouTube}, YouTube, 19 Sept. 2013, www.youtube.com/watch?v=IMSyhyvr0mw.}
Fairfield Porter paints with the gestalt in mind. In *Columbus Day*, Porter paints with flat color swatches to create illusion. The reflected light and the bushes are simply paint clumps and ink blots combined to create an illusion of what was truly there. It is said that “as you get to know his extensive art criticism, his lectures and letters, when you recall the man and his conversation, it is clear that behind the paintings, or in parallel to them, runs an extensive network of articulated ideas and convictions - the product of an intense and independent intellectual life - that shapes the character of his work.” My work addresses the universal through an intimate intertwining web of personal inquiry, reflection and narrative. My writings and visual artwork ride together along an uncertain path through illusion and reality. Over time, I leave behind a predetermined expectation of oil paints and rely on thinking and insight as medium: the questions I ask my father beyond the veil, the new perspective gained from my brothers’ silence and the rhizomatic connections between my father’s genius understanding of physics and my contemplative investigation of life through art. Porter tends to believe that we standardize and conceptualize what we see instead of accepting what our senses really tell us. My work is a visual representation of all that is bubbling and interacting within my body, mind and soul. It is a cacophony of beliefs, impressions, uncertainties, physical and spiritual connections that reveal a cohesive illusion of reality that only the human soul can truly understand.

Peter Doig

“You can ask what the paintings are about but I can’t really tell you.” Peter Doig’s quote reminds me of the constant flux of interpretation when I view my own work. My work is about my personal perception of life around me in the present. My interpretation of what I began is distinct from my understanding of what was created. And what I saw later was different from what was there before. I cannot control the flow of inspiration that enters my heart and mind. At the point in which an idea is born, my understanding behind the work, whether clear or dim, exists enough to push the idea forward into creation. As my hands interact with the material or I view the work from a distance, past experience interweaves with present feeling and collides with new understanding, thus creating an ever-developing network of inspiration. Each layer that we add to our lives alters how we understand the past.«

Philosophy and Aesthetics

Faith

Abilene Tucker, a young girl struggling with separation from her father, explains “To me the moon represents the ability to reveal what is hidden in the dark.” Similar to the principle of faith, “Faith is not to have a perfect knowledge of things; therefore if ye have faith ye hope for things which are not seen, which are true.” Each rising sun awakens me to the darkness. Curbing fear and discouragement, I reach for my camera and turn the oblique edges of the corner of my room into a visual phenomenon. Descending the stairs, I enter my living room and capture

17 Vanderpool, Clare, and Justine Eyre. Moon over Manifest. Listening Library, 2011.
18 Alma 32:21. The Book of Mormon: An Account Written by the Hand of Mormon, upon Plates Taken from the Plates of Nephi ... The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 2012.
the light as it fights its way through the curtains. Perspective is corrected as I photograph reflected light across the clock. Faith is things that are real, but aren’t seen.

**Getting Lost**

There are hidden truths among the regular. Our inability to discern what is surrounding our everyday keeps us in the dark. Jean-Dominique Bauby in his book *Diving Bell and the Butterfly* leads readers through his true story of complete paralysis—everything but his left eye—after suffering a stroke. Bauby loses himself in the ordinary. “Before the last white coat left the room, I signaled my wish to have the TV turned on, low. On the screen was my father's favorite quiz show. Since daybreak, an unremitting drizzle had been streaking my windows.”

By including such monotony within the text, Bauby steps beyond regularity and steps into what lies between the pages. Insignificant and unrelated observations like the TV in the background, the drizzling rain on the windows or the silence that finally reveals itself, when seen through a different lens, create a larger, more detailed map of our existence; a glimpse into reality.

I passed by the telephone resting in the studio halls. Its yellow surface reveals its age. The dense layer of dust weighs it down for another decade of sleep. By losing myself in the untold story of the telephone placed in my path, I felt a connection. It called out to me. I wondered what phone calls it had made. My works are created by doing, thinking, being. I think when I do. And what I do makes me who I am. As the waves of the everyday rise and fall my vision of the horizon is repeatedly lost and found. As tempests toss and turn, I fall into a numb-like state. I remain entranced on the melodic rhythm of the white peaks of rising water that separate and take flight into the atmosphere, countered by the heavy silent darkness of the consuming waves that

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are impossible to escape. My thoughts turn to what lies ahead or what lies beneath. But there is no fear, just awe.

**Illusion and Reality**

Author C.S. Lewis shares how reality can be developed when combining a series of illusory layers. “A world of one dimension would be a straight line. In a two-dimensional world, you still get straight lines, but many lines make one figure. In a three-dimensional world, you still get figures but many figures make one solid body. In other words, as you advance to more real and more complicated levels, you do not leave behind you the things you found on the simpler levels: you still have them, but combined in new ways - in ways you could not imagine if you knew only the simpler levels.”

As we constantly encounter the present, illusion and reality alternate. For years, I knew my father. Or I thought I knew him. I knew him in that present. But that was only an illusion. Through thorough investigation into my father’s life, I realize I never really knew him. In fact, I still don’t know him. Even when I see him again in the after-life, I will only be able to create a then present illusion of how I really see him. With my view as simply one vantage point of his life in retrospect, only he knows the reality of his past. I do know one thing: “Uncertainty doesn’t make life meaningless. It makes it interesting and curious.”

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Heaven and Hell

My work often entails the use of lines as a metaphor for our lives as a continual experience. At times, we are faced with a challenge. Challenges present themselves as forces in our lives. Through Albert Einstein, we understand that “every object persists in its state of rest or uniform motion in a straight line unless it is compelled to change that state by forces impressed upon it.”

When I came upon my father’s writings of his past, I was amazed at the truth before me. No son would wish to discover what I did. But that was my present reality and this force of knowledge would compel me to react. Should I hate my father, forgive him immediately, imagine it didn’t even occur, question him further? My father was in Hell and he had pulled me down with him.

My work, Refraction addresses the conflicting or maybe not so conflicting powers of light and the absence of light. Just like positive and negative space, they can be considered distinct. But when you look at the overall image, you are simultaneously reading positive and negative space, and one works to distinguish the other. Similarly, the light and darkness in our lives work together. And sometimes the only way to reach the light of Heaven is to walk through the darkness of Hell.

Justice and Mercy

My works are a direct visual translation of how I reacted to hidden secrets of my father’s past. I began with a sense of surprise. I wondered if it was even true. Interrogation was the prominent sensation as I distanced myself from him. How could I be a part of him, and especially his past? I felt for my Mom who sacrificed and suffered. I felt for my seven siblings.

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who each had experienced their father in a different way. I felt pity for myself, not being able to be raised with a father in the home, missing that part of childhood.

It wasn’t until a long while later that I realized I possess a lot of similar characteristics, feelings and challenges in my life that my father experienced. He really was a part of me. And I could not deny it. Justice and mercy ebbed and flowed as I discovered more and more about him and our relationship that was previously hidden behind a veil.

With a new reality of my father, I could choose to remain in my current state of mind: Hell. Or I could choose to forgive. I chose. Forgiveness released my father from the pains of the past and released me from the pains of the present. Now, my son can forgive me.

**Individual Works**

*Copy*

I found it dated April 25, 1989. I remember. That is, I remember when I discovered the fact that I really remember very little of my father. I remember artifacts: a video of him in an academic setting, a picture of him with my mother on her honeymoon night, his mug shot from one of his ID’s he left behind. I remind myself I need to take care of those copies of memories. At the same time, I realize the reality that cancer eats away at those secondhand memories. After his words fade and blacken, the pages are wiped clean and white as snow. Clarity and confusion are simultaneously evident through the gridded timeline of disintegration. These copies will just end up being thrown away.
The inability to accurately express oneself orally is called aphasia. It is the brain’s attempt to cope through decay. I walk my routine path capturing pictures, discovering messages from my father. Hints of his existence. Evidence of our connection. I dug into my memory, what little I have. I interviewed my brothers; their words and silence were equally profound. The authorship of their memories is now mine. I solidify my memories on paper. But the paper just decays.

*Self-portrait*

Self-portrait is a performative work that consists of a constant assemblage and re-assemblage of the only remains I have of my father combined with found materials from the present. Why, if material things do not continue with us, are they so significant?

*Veil*

I face the paper toward him, interrogating my father on the other side of the veil. With each letter hand-cut, I ask my father questions. How many times should we forgive? Seventy times seven?

*Surveillance*

Footage of old footage filmed and altered. Times lost that I can’t recover. Memories of memories past and the altering of a memory each time it is reviewed.

*Bread and Water*
Bring me your offering. Compassion for sorrow. In memory of His flesh and blood. In memory of my father. For me. For my son.
kevin hunter
this is not a dead man

annette and jerry johns gallery 214
niu jack arends art building

mfa thesis exhibition
march 18-21

closing reception
march 21
6-8:30 pm
bread and water served
This Is Not a Dead man (installation view), 2019

Copy, Photocopy paper, 15’ x 16’, September 2018
Copy (detail), Photocopy paper, 15’ x 16’, September 2018

This Is Not a Dead man (installation view), 2019
Aphasia, Digital photography and text on photocopy paper, 6’ x 15”, October 2018

Aphasia (detail), Digital photography and text on photocopy paper, 6’ x 15”, October 2018
Aphasia (detail), Digital photography and text on photocopy paper, 6’ x 15’, October 2018

This Is Not a Dead man (installation view), 2019
Self-portrait, Found objects, 8’ x 15’ x 6’, October 2018

Self-portrait (detail), Found objects, 8’ x 15’ x 6’, October 2018
This Is Not a Dead man (installation view), 2019

Veil, Hand-cut Bristol paper, 80” x 56” x 1”, October 2018
Veil (detail), Hand-cut Bristol paper, 80” x 56” x 1”, October 2018

This Is Not a Dead man (installation view), 2019
Surveillance, Digital film, 6” x 9” (installation view), 2019

Bread and Water, Kitchen island, bread and water, 34” x 48” x 24”, March 2019
Comprehensive Question Inquired by Katie Kahn

Imagine that you are awarded a substantial grant for an installation in a public place which includes both interior and exterior spaces. The project calls for the artist to have a prior relationship to, or familiarity with, the site, and the installation should respond to the site in a personal way. The installation may include a range of media and materials. You may need to hire assistants and/or arrange for the fabrication of certain components. Please describe your installation in detail - specificity is important. You may include drawings or other supporting images and materials.

Response

It was five seconds left in the match. All I had to do was let time pass. Instead, I fought intuition and took an open shot. That’s all it took for me to move from the first-place podium, fame and a full wrestling scholarship to an onlooker worshipping what I lost.

Exterior view of Cleveland Public Auditorium, Cleveland, Ohio
The site is the Cleveland Public Auditorium. The exterior space consists of a large stone neoclassical entrance and a large bus parked right outside. The interior space of the exhibition will utilize the main auditorium in the building.

Upon arrival, spectators are confronted with six newspaper stands lined along the sidewalk, facing the grand entrance of Cleveland, Ohio’s public auditorium adjacent to the parked charter bus representing my original arrival to the stadium as a high school senior.

The front page of the newspaper tells of wrestler Lindsey Durlacher’s death. Lindsey Durlacher was a friend and wrestling companion at the time he passed. His death struck extra hard because of a previous conversation we had recently had in the parking lot before practice one day. “You’ve got the life,” he told me. “A wife and kids, something to fight for.” I gingerly
countered by reminding him of all his wrestling accomplishments he obtained from around the world. Although the conversation was brief, the sincerest desires of his heart were clearly revealed. Shortly before his death, Lindsey longed for something more than just athletic status. After his death, I longed to share more of my life with him. Passersby may walk right past the news without even noticing.

Among the stimulation of daylight flooding the streets between the high rises, honking taxis and busy foot traffic, viewers begin their journey into the exhibition by ascending metal bleacher-like stairs to a dark vestibule surrounded by black suede curtains with one overhead light to give just enough light to know you are alive. The choice of whether or not to proceed is the viewer’s. Taking the leap of faith through the brief corridor of darkness, viewers enter the charter bus. Only a few overhead seat lights are on. The interior of the bus is even darker because the windows are covered with a vinyl tinted image of my wall drawing spanning the full length of the bus on each side.

*Creation*, Marker on studio wall, 8’ x 16’, 2019
Only a select number of viewers are allowed to enter the bus at each 1 minute interval. The sense of anticipation plagues those in line just as it does before a wrestling match. The small number of people within the bus encourages introspection.

Movement from the light of the television screens mounted in front of each seat peak viewers’ interest. Every screen simultaneously plays the same video of me repeatedly running back and forth in the hotel corridor. The camera recording is from a GoPro on top of my head; the camera setup naturally causes a lot of uneven and uncomfortable bouncing of the image on the screen. Splashes of ornamental reds, yellows and blues decorate the carpeted hallway lined with silenced hotel room doors as I run. The film incites question of why I was there? And what sensations viewers may have within a monotonous hotel corridor.

The film is of a fading memory I have of losing weight for a national competition when I was a sophomore in high school. One night, 13 lbs. My team manager had persuaded me to change plans and make the effort to go down a weight class before weigh-ins the next morning. I stayed up all night in heavy layers of clothing, attempting to run off the weight back and forth through the long hotel hallway, alone, in the middle of the night, until I pushed myself so hard that I couldn’t go on. Exhausted, I entered my coach’s hotel room and collapsed in front of his bed. My legs were already numbed and the sensation was gradually climbing up my body. I waited, unable to do anything else. I was supported into the car and to the arena to weigh in. I had missed the mark. The scale read 0.8 lbs. overweight. All of that effort for nothing.

Exiting the front of the bus, viewers are blinded by the light of day as their eyes struggle to adjust from the bus’s dim lighting. Their eyes rise up with the aid of six ancient columns of 30’x 5’ vinyl banners along the surface of the building between each ornamented window. The banners are printed with my wall drawing spanning all six banners. The intimidating size of the
building before the viewers mirrors the feelings I had when arriving just hours before the competition; I struggled to maintain courage as thoughts of doubt clouded my thinking. I don’t feel like I ever really conquered the weakness of letting fear overpower faith.

Inside, the main walkway of the arena is only lit with emergency lighting. Nobody is around. Viewers are led to the main auditorium where the light of the room is spotlighted onto four wrestling mats with space to walk between each mat. Viewers meander around the mats, but not on them, as if it is sacred ground. They are unsure how to treat the space. The mats are the main focus. They are what I recall most from the past. The things that happened there are what still hurt today.
The four mats represent the four most significant losses of my wrestling career. In every case, I know I was better than my opponent on a technical level. But I allowed doubt and fear to overwhelm me. There is almost nothing more difficult to experience than the gut wrenching, nauseating, heart-aching feeling that arises before competition. If you’re not careful, that fear can begin months before the actual competition. Your mind exaggerates all of your opponent’s strengths and your own weaknesses.
Electronic score boxes and timers are displayed for each mat. As viewers explore the site, the timers loop, starting and stopping according to the real matches I lost, with the scores accumulating as they really occurred. I can never change those results. They just keep repeating in my head. It is too hard to forget.

Cold air lays heavily on the mats and empty space dominates the arena. It is eerily silent, except for the thoughts of viewers relating the installation to their experiences of loss. As viewers adapt to the silence, they notice the tic, tic, tic of the electronic timers as time passes: a subtle yet profound physical representation of the past.

Suddenly, a loud buzzer from one of the timers goes off. The echo resides in viewers ears for a few brief seconds before the weight of silence refills the room. Just when viewers were able to slow their heart rate and hear the silence once again, another buzzer sounds. The buzzers repeatedly sound at the end of every two-minute period of each six-minute match. When the match is done, the time is out. The timer and score return to zero. Maybe I needed just a few more seconds to change the outcome. I didn’t notice how much time had passed.
At the north end of the wide-open auditorium, a massive 30’x30’ printed banner of my artwork created for this site hangs behind a medals podium. The podium is not brightly lit, but the banner stands out with its provocative lighting. A pile of my wrestling singlets and gear are tossed to the ground a few steps in front of the podium. Blood and sweat remain on the apparel. Barely visible are medals under the pile of worn singlets and apparel. Only observant viewers notice them. The medals are insignificant now.

*Untitled, Acrylic on board, 12” x 12”, 2016*

What occurred that day at the Cleveland, Ohio Public Auditorium drove a needle through my heart and future aspirations. I was forced to find my footing. It is only now that I can clearly look behind me and see that the needle that pierced my heart that day was only stitching frayed ends together to create a sturdier fabric of life. That day taught me who I am and what I truly want to become. I am a fighter. But the fight does not have to be on the wrestling mat.
After I had retired from wrestling in 2012, my coach, Ivan Ivanov, shared with me words that I have clung to. “This chapter of your life has ended. But it doesn’t mean that your competitive soul has to rest. Fight for what is next.” Rebecca Solnit shared a similar philosophy. “Leave the door open for the unknown, the door into the dark. That’s where the most important things come from, where you yourself came from, and where you will go.” At the time, I had lost everything: fame, financial support, a future, my edge, my image of who I was. Finally, after being lost and trapped for so long, I realized that all I had to do was let go. “And when everything else is gone, you can be rich in loss.”

For years, I struggled to connect my wrestling past with my artistic interests. They always seemed so distinct from one another. But planning this exhibition has clarified the fact that wrestling and art for me are fueled by the same principle: 90% is mental.

I am an artist who creates for the benefit of society. As artist Shirin Neshat states, “I am an artist, not an activist. I am creating work simply to entice a dialogue...I am only asking questions.” A successful artwork should draw the viewer in, cause them to personally reflect and determine where they stand. My Cleveland exhibition will be a representation of life’s journey, of battles lost and insight gained. Jean-Dominique Bauby in his book *Diving Bell and the Butterfly* lost everything—but movement in his left eye. Feeling his way through loss, Bauby found new life and energy; he gained a reason to live and way to influence others through his journey.

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25 Ibid.
26 Grosenick, Uta. *Art Now!: 2.* Taschen.
Viewers will feel the sincerity within the work, the energy that speaks without words. They will be able to relate to the emptiness felt in the edifice, the anticipation for something to occur or longing for time to return. They will relate to the podium and artifacts placed before it as a shrine for hopes and dreams never fulfilled. Then viewers will determine for themselves how they will proceed in the next steps of their journey.
### Proposed Budget for Exhibition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Cost ($)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rental of auditorium (April 12-26, 2019)</td>
<td>15,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Permits for long-term parking and use of city property</td>
<td>500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public relations and promotion of event</td>
<td>2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Document prints (books, postcards, ticket stubs, pamphlets, etc.)</td>
<td>400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Banners to hang on building facade</td>
<td>800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Banner to hang in auditorium</td>
<td>1000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artist’s flight, room and board during venue</td>
<td>1200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One personal assistant stipend</td>
<td>800</td>
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<tr>
<td>Additional event staff</td>
<td>1000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rental of wrestling mats</td>
<td>1200</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mat tape</td>
<td>80</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rental of Scoreboards</td>
<td>150</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rental of podium and announcers table eqpt</td>
<td>150</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rental of charter bus</td>
<td>1800</td>
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<tr>
<td>Installation of TV screens and headphones for each seat on bus</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arrangement on back of charter bus to enter</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rental of newspaper stands</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation of additional supplies</td>
<td>50</td>
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Comprehensive Question Inquired by Rebecca Houze

Define “sustainability.” What does this concept mean to you? In our course, we explored sustainability from the point of view of historic preservation, stewardship of the natural environment, and social systems. Are these goals mutually exclusive? Can sustainability encompass an ethic of progress that takes into account diverse and sometimes contradictory goals?

Response

A bag of apples, bananas. Beans, broccoli and spinach for dinner. And some French fries, corn dogs, frozen pizza, Hot Pockets, ice cream sandwiches, family size Snickers bag, Jelly Belly’s, Ding Dongs, cookies, crème soda, Gushers fruit snacks and barbeque chips for quick snacks. With food stamps, why not?

Successful sustainability entails all parties working together to create a productive and interactive system. Although adaptations of government funded food assistance programs began with good intentions, collaborative sustainability seems to have been forgotten as US food stamp beneficiaries have gradually adapted to their resources.

Relying solely on the government’s guidelines to regulate food stamp purchases, recipients are free to veer away from good intentions and misuse resources, which naturally leads to a widespread standardization of poorer health since large corporations like J.P. Morgan, Kroger and Walmart are all benefiting from food stamps . . . which leads to malnutrition, fatigue, obesity, mental illness, diabetes and cancer among food stamp recipients . . . which leads to
increased government Medicaid spending . . . which leads to increased burdens on taxpayers . . . and that is only the beginning."

Similar to the snowball effect of carelessly distributing resources and avoiding personal responsibility within our contemporary food chain, society as a whole, could fall into the same downward spiral if we do not act responsibly and strive for sustainability. The fight for sustainability must include the following underlying principles: mutual respect between environment and humankind, the relation between past, present and future and open communication. In this way, all parties work together to create a productive and interactive system that thrives.

Society receives mixed messages about sustainability and its need for our world to survive. Pop culture presents the issue of using plastic bags as faux pas in comedic fashion. Documentaries reveal worst-case scenarios of melting icebergs that will result in the world burning up. And the media stirs a large pool of muddy confusion in the middle of it all. In order to maintain a healthy level of sustainability, humankind must first comprehensively understand the link between individuals, society and Mother Earth. They are relational; they are alive. “When half of the people get the idea that they do not have to work because the other half is going to take care of them, and when the other half gets the idea that it does no good to work because somebody else is going to get what they work for, that my dear friend, is the end of any nation.”

As mankind has discovered and developed new resources, we have forgotten our mutual relationship with nature and our use of its resources. And leading corporations and governments

29 Rogers, Dr. Adrian. Liberty Tree, libertytree.ca/quotes/Adrian.Rogers.Quote.4152.
are only catalyzing the forgetfulness of our partnership with nature. Sustainability is not disjointed; it is a woven net of factors and beneficiaries that ebb and flow as an interconnected system. When one element is altered, all other elements change too.

Henry David Thoreau shares insights in his book, “Where I Lived and What I Lived For”. Part of his sojourn in Concord, Massachusetts was to live with nature to achieve a sense of “spiritual wakefulness” and mutual understanding between nature and humankind.

Like a healthy marriage, as he and nature co-existed, they learned of each other’s strengths and weakness and combined efforts to build an even stronger unit. They kept each other alive; They kept each other at peace. They gave each other meaning. Still, there is hope. After each winter comes the refreshing smell of spring.

Too often, the past began with sincere and hopeful ideals and simply ended up in failure: The Pullman Company Town, St. Louis’ Pruitt-Igoe and Chicago’s Cabrini-Green. Have you ever asked yourself why it is that after so much failure, humankind seems to find a renewed energy and faith to try, try again? Something within us lifts us to our feet and helps us reach for the ideal once again. Author Jane Jacobs explains that communities “are an immense laboratory of trial and error, failure and success”. When we learn from the past we can build a better future.

I view living in the present as a state of interacting with the physical that already exists. Architect Christopher Alexander designs homes in which the physical edifice and its occupants co-exist in the present and plan for the future. He discourages homes built as

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inorganic units forcing its occupants to adapt. Doing so ensures functionality of the home and comfort of its occupants."

How will our footprint on time and space affect the future? It is our responsibility to live with one another and nature with open communication. During Thoreau’s communion with nature, he and nature grew closer together. He was not only physically among the elements: the rain and wind, but he was connecting spiritually. Through open communication, Thoreau and nature built a trust between one another. In the same way that Thoreau and nature bonded, *community*, no matter the size, functions most effectively when trust is built between all parties.

Open communication entails hearing other perspectives and respecting the individual needs of all parties. It is possible that needs will seem contradictory. Yet, there are times when it is necessary to break the letter of the law in order to obey the spirit of the law. It is absolutely necessary to take into consideration the individual needs of a community (whether community entails a large group of people or a single individual) to determine the best decision in any given circumstance. This can only be done through open communication. With the rampant output of news, advertisements and social media it is ironic to think that the real issue of sustainability is so often unacknowledged. Instead of talking as often as we do, society needs to listen more.

It is clear that, through the ages, organization and laws for the common good have led to an overall greater production and peace among societies in many thriving

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communities. Still, the risk for authority to gain too much power over individuals constantly lingers.

Returning to the idea of food stamps and society’s sincere desire to fight hunger, author Thomas Pogge validates the concern for too much authority and the snuffing out of choice. “The requirements of the criteria should not be understood as exhaustive; leaving societies the ability to modify the criteria based on their own needs.”

My artwork reveals who I am as an individual; I create with what resources I have. If I have push pins to complete an artwork, the material (push pins, in this case) and I collaborate to satisfy both my economic and sustainability needs as a husband and father and the aesthetic needs of the material itself within the composition. Photocopies, print paper, Walmart picture frames, found objects within my studio space, donated electronics, a decaying piece of wood I found while playing in the field with my kids, my wife’s aging wedding dress (clearly with her permission)—all are valid resources. At other times, I may make the decision to purchase a low-cost prefabricated butcher block countertop island, online Polaroid film, Exacto knife blades or gallery magnets. My decisions as an artist are not extreme in either direction; I, along with every human being, am provided the ability to choose for myself the correct balance between economic need, sustainability and aesthetics. All things need to be considered both in part and as a whole.

In planning my family’s home, we must take into consideration the needs of all individuals and their relations with each other, the community, the environment and the past, present and future. Is it better for my family to be sustainable simply by purchasing a

home that is already built? It seems the most logical. But what about long-term versus short-term waste and expenditures? And what about the different forms of waste like physical material waste as opposed to the emotional toll, physical labor and loss of time due to rusty pipes or a non-intuitive house plan? What about intellectual strain by neglecting design aesthetics regarding the beauty of home?

Each of these questions must be answered individually. For my family, it is one way, for the neighbor next door, it may be completely opposite. The variations in the right way are as vast as the earth’s population.

James Lovelock’s Gaia Theory shares that living and inorganic elements have evolved together as a single living system. Humankind and Mother Earth are alive. We have both been endowed with the ability to heal ourselves. Similarly, even though society seems to be drastically confused about what sustainability really is, we have the tendency to recover from hard times. Human populations grow back after widespread disease, flora and fauna reappear after natural disasters and societies reorganize after war. We often have and still can recover. Even though the notion of sustainability remains out of reach, it is from deep within us that we keep trying. “Earth is much more than something to consume. The state of the human soul and the environment are interconnected with each affecting and influencing the other. . . . We depend on its bounty. When the earth thrives, we thrive too. Our responsibility is to take care of and cherish our home. We are stewards, not owners.”

I remember standing as near as possible to the rushing water, only meters from Niagara Falls. It was moving so rapidly, yet the surface of the water was so calm as it passed. Each individual particle of water, existing separately, combined to create one whole body of water. The particles moved in unison. Then, seconds later, falling off the edge, the particles revealed their true identity as individual elements, only to be led hundreds of feet below under gravity’s authority. To achieve sustainability, societies must keep in mind the principles of mutual respect between environment and humankind, an understanding of past, present and future and open communication.
Comprehensive Question Inquired by Frank Trankina

What do you see as important issues in contemporary art? And how do you see your work in relation to these issues?

Response

I consider the major issues within contemporary art as threefold: What is the essence of contemporary art? Whose interpretation reigns? and What good is it for? I address these issues as questions because my work is the result of asking questions and exploring. I only claim to address and not answer life’s playfully concrete contradictions. Even when I seem to personally find an opinion, who is to say that my opinion will never change. That, I guess, is why I consider them contemporary issues. They are merely temporary.

What Is the Essence of Contemporary Art?

What is it that triggers a work to be considered complete or, in fact, a work of art? Is it the physical end product that defines a successful artwork or is the worth of an artwork due to its underlying concept? In my artwork, I consistently address the need for balance between two extremes or contradictory beliefs within any context. If there is an extreme in either the port or starboard side of one’s theoretical boat, they will certainly capsize. It is important for the artist to ultimately reach a balance between significance of the physical product and the concept of the work.
Art critic Clive Bell states "the starting point for all systems of aesthetics must be the personal experience of a peculiar emotion".

This means that even without figurative representation, Jackson Pollock’s smattering and dripping of paint can be considered art because a viewer may feel something significant and personally emotional from the work. So, abstract expressionism, within the modern era was and is accepted as a legitimate movement of art. Bell further solidified his widely accepted opinion by stating that the aesthetic emotion felt by such a viewer is due to an essential quality of art called *significant form*: “lines and colors combined in a particular way, certain forms and relations of forms, [that] stir our aesthetic emotions.”

According to Bell, an artwork cannot truly be considered a “work of art” without significant form, --without lines, colors and other elements of art. What about Sol Lewitt’s instructions on creating wall drawings? Sure, the wall drawings are great art. They have obvious line and form. But what about his instructions? Can the instructions themselves be considered works of art? I am not talking about the physical paper that the instructions are printed on. I am talking about the actual instructions. The idea or possibility of making the wall drawing is what is considered his “art”.

Bell’s definition of significant form states that aesthetics requires an artwork to possess the elements of art to then evoke an emotion within the viewer. But if the work that is created is completed by someone else other than Sol Lewitt, wouldn’t the work of art simply be a reproduction or substitute for the actual work?

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39 “Significant Form Theory of Art: Clive Bell.” Stuckism Wales, stuckismwales.co.uk/theory/tblast/significant.php.
Let’s go a step further. What about Tino Sehgal's non-object based art? He removed the object entirely. Although there were performers, called interpreters, that directly engaged with visitors, once the exhibition was over, there was no evidence of the actual work. Sehgal insisted that no documentation take place during the exhibition nor did he even allow for any logistical documentation to occur, like the signing of financial papers. Sehgal assured that no substitute of an artwork would take place of the actual work.\(^\text{41}\)

Both Sol Lewitt and Tino Sehgal's careers are highly successful. It can clearly be seen through their works that the underlying concept of the work was the main and only element involved. The physical product was eliminated.

It that truly the case? And what about the balance? Well, there is still a balance because there is still a physical product . . . even though that physical product seems to no longer exist. The physical product, typically visible to the naked eye, is gone. But a new physical product exists; It is the knowledge of the fact that the event took place and the associated emotion evoked by the work within the actual viewer or anyone else who may discuss the works at a future time.

As in all of my artwork, I follow the opinion of artist Francis Alys. “Sometimes to make something is really to make nothing; and paradoxically, sometimes to make nothing is to make something.”\(^\text{42}\)

Each instant a thought or memory occurs, there is a physical energy that is transferred from within our bodies to cause that thought. Author Caroline Myss, who specializes in the connecting the spiritual with the physical, explicitly declares “Every thought creates form.”\(^\text{43}\)


\(^{42}\) Grosenick, Uta. Art Now!: 2. Taschen.

Robert Covelli, theoretical physicist further explains that atoms are at the beginning of all things. Just as science has proven light to be physical and composed of atoms, our thoughts, dreams, hopes and emotions, are also comprised of atoms.

There is an energy force in the universe that creates relation between any two things. Science has already explained that energy is mass. And mass is form. Thus, any concept, although just a thought, is literally physical and therefore creates some elemental form of line, color, or shape. In that way, Sol Lewitt and Tino Sehgal's art concepts can be explained through emotional as well as physical and formal elements. Even if an artwork gives the impression of being conceptually extreme, it is not extreme at all; it is merely achieving a balance between an actual physical product and underlying concept.

My work continues to transform just as we as human beings are. The present is real but only for that instantaneous moment. After that, the present is in the past. My work alternates between revealing and obscuring the physical and spiritual. My work creates a space full of hidden particles interacting with one another and those present. Like my work Self-portrait, my art acts as a catalyst to see the energy that exists but is not typically seen. The work may only seem like physical objects at first, unrelated and unorganized. But there is more present than the eye can see.

Just as light and sound interact with me even though I cannot always observe their presence, the objects and materials in my studio and I collaborate, mutually respecting one another’s strengths and weaknesses. The object takes the lead, while, at other times, I am at the helm. We understand and support each other.

When viewers are aware of their senses, a connection is made between the material artwork and the viewer. The material possesses a spiritual element, or underlying conceptual
being, that allows for connections among each material and the viewer. These particles of energy inspire, warn and comfort. My work lifts the veil from before the reality in which we truly live. All things spiritual are physical, and all things physical are spiritual.

The formal elements of value, shape and space occupy the physical space and awaken the invisible particles of emotion, memory and thought as I question my father’s intentions and meticulously cut out each letter of my interrogating questions to him through the Veil. Composition, color and form combine to create an open-ended narrative of my brothers’ and my experiences with our father while allowing viewers a glimpse at the tangible presence of feeling and introspective questions. It is the precarious and real balance between the physical product and concept of the artwork that is the essence of contemporary art.

*Whose Interpretation Reigns?*

Regarding the voice of the artist vs. the power of the viewer’s own interpretation, I have mixed feelings. But that is what is so special about effective contemporary art: the fact that I can never quite find a distinct answer of which is more significant is the epitome of Barthes’s concept.

Contemporary philosopher Roland Barthes touches on the influence of time within an analyzed understanding of a work:

“The Author when believed in, is always conceived of as the past of his own book: book and author stand automatically on a single line divided into a before and an after. The Author is thought to nourish the book, which is to say that he exists before it, thinks, suffers, lives for it, is in the same relation of antecedence to his work as a father to his

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child. In complete contrast, the modern scriptor born simultaneously with the text, is in no way equipped with a being preceding or exceeding the writing, is not the subject with the book as predicate; there is no other time than that of the enunciation and every text is eternally written here and now.”

The here and now is what I feel when viewing my own artwork. Once my work is viewed, I have no more, or, at least, significantly less influence on the meaning of the work. My job as the artist or author of a work is done; I have created the work.

Now, the viewer’s job begins. Thus, “the author enters into his own death” and the writing (whether literal or metaphorical) begins. The viewer is at the helm. But what viewer? You? Me? Her? Him? Or the artist . . . again? I say again because even the artist’s interpretation when originally creating is inevitably different than his or her interpretation now.

Interpretation is relative to time and the originator of the interpretation. The original understanding of my own work is altered from how I temporarily experience it in the now. As time distances me from the original interpretation, alterations, whether additive or subtractive, are occurring within my memory and background knowledge is being reformulated. This morphed rhizome of past memories, present experience and future anticipations is what controls my interpretation now.

Furthermore, Barthes states “. . . the author is never more than the instance writing.” I hesitate to go so far as to agree that the author is never more. I think the author still exists. First, as explained above, they could end up being the new writer since time will continually alter their

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46 Ibid.
47 Ibid.
memory and understanding of their own work. Second, a viewer’s interpretation, although the interpretations are their own, can be persuaded or realigned by hearing the artist’s original intentions or past experiences. In fact, we can say that it does realign the viewer’s interpretation because the viewer, after learning of the artist and his or her past, makes an unavoidable choice of whether or not to accept the artist’s interpretation into the viewer’s own present perception of the work.

Proper balance between artist and viewer ebb and flow with contemporary art . . . and that is what make it so exciting.

What Good Is It For?

I wake up. It is dark. I am under the covers. I see a crack of light. It is from the outside world—the day. I stay in my bed. My mind wanders. The hum of the passing cars just outside catches my attention. What about the people in the cars? Where are they going? Why are they going?

I walk downstairs. My mind is unsure of what to focus on. I finally get to eating. I reach into the stream of light heating the room just in front of me. My chewing matches the drumming rhythm of the washing machine.

Arriving at the studio, I reach over my shoulder aiming the keyless behind me. Bwoop! The car says its goodbyes. I keep my eyes ahead and tread through my compacted path of rotten leaves, feeling for the right key. It’s the one with the worn-down numbers. The door slams and the building’s echo lets me know I’m alone. I hit the lights and breathe in the cold damp air.

I don’t know what to create; I just know that I am supposed to be here. Medium plasters the palms of my hands and I couldn’t care less about my appearance.
What good is my time and energy for? The arts must be for a reason because, in my opinion, every intelligent conversation uses art and music as a metaphor. A professor recently asked me “What is it that you want to do with your work?”

An undeniable characteristic of my work is the performative aspect of researching, creating, thinking and feeling. The performance and ever-developing understanding occurs pre-, during and post-production. As I question my father’s intentions and meticulously cut out each letter of my interrogating questions to him through the veil I feel an ebb and flow of justice and mercy. It is the prolonged deciphering of my father’s confused words as I photocopy a copy of a copy of a copy. It is the deepening understanding of my brothers’ relationships with my father as I interview them about distant memories. It is the wisdom gained from metaphor as I cover the old found desk with a new layer of veil-like vellum. It is the revealing perspective of what my mother went through as I investigate her endless hoarding. It is the revealing clarity of who I am and what I want to become.

For viewers, I want to lift the veil from their eyes to see what really exists. See what really matters. Rather than addressing negativity, my work addresses the serious, true, sincere and difficult. Real life contains moments of sorrow and disappointment; it is only through sorrow that one can truly differentiate joy.

My work seeks not for personal gain of money, power and prestige but to aid others in uncovering life’s facade and transcending beyond what they ever thought possible. I have let go of the fallacy that what I do must be hung on a gallery wall or sold for profit. Of course, the worldly aspects of life would be easier as a successful and wealthy artist. But that is not what I live for.

I live for God. After realizing his “news-induced depression”, Physician and photographer Dr. David Fryburg chose to use his talents to “spread kindness, compassion and empathy” by exhibiting positive artwork. My hope is similar: spread real and personal joy as viewers come to understand themselves and their relation with others and their environment. When personal understanding is developed, appreciation and growth increases. Strong individuals, in turn, build strong communities.

Rather than producing artwork with the aim to build my CV, my focus will be on building individuals and communities. I made the conscious effort to spread the gratitude I have for life to others through my artwork; I have already begun by donating my paintings to several organizations where I feel they could make a difference like the Illinois Board of Higher Education, local libraries from which my family benefits and commissions for those who could benefit. One example is a work I am currently brainstorming for my sister who addressed her marital struggles and wanted a way to cherish the growth she and her husband gained through that burden. Donating commissions goes against what the contemporary commercial art world believes about never deflating the value of one’s own artwork because it will end up deflating the value of competitors’ works. That only makes my art conceptually stronger.

I live for my family. Compromise needs to be reached between the need to sustain family and time with family. Through graduate school, my wife, children and I seriously discussed our future plans. Do we want to be traveling artists together as a family? Is it right if I, as father, spend the majority of my time away from home to promote my work? Should I return to a non-art related job in order to assure financial stability? If so, after several years, will I fall into the

pit of mediocrity and routine and never again push myself to produce a significant artwork again? These questions are real for any sincere artist. And none of their answers are right or wrong; they are simply individual.

What good is contemporary art for? With all this in mind, my family and I have felt inspired to serve each other and our community by returning to high school teaching and coaching. For some reason, I connect deeply with that age group. They need a strong support and I am able to provide that when they don’t already have it in the home.

Through high school teaching, I am able to provide stability for my wife and children. Each day my children leave for school, they battle against society. Spiritual, emotional and physical safety. Intellectual and social development. They are all at stake. We have to fight as a family.

My son, Preston, in particular. I see his need for me to be there for him. My relationship with him is worth more than fame or money. Believe me, I have desires for fame and riches. But that is why I love producing art. Through it, I see the real purpose of what life is about, not the facade that media and life’s busyness portrays. No professional success will ever be worth losing the opportunity to raise and spend time with our children.

Through artistically investigating my father, I learned a lot about our similarities. One mirroring characteristic is that we both work very hard at what we do. Yet, my father learned very late about his sincere priorities. In a letter to his mother and siblings after receiving a diagnosis of brain cancer, my father wrote the following:

“My primary goals are of course to raise my family in a positive spiritual and balanced way and to join us close together in support of each other and the gospel. I wish I had made these
my primary goals in the past. They are definitely my primary goals now. I hope and pray that you all understand this and will also pray for me.”

I want to live my life differently. That may be one reason why he has wanted to communicate with me so badly through my art during graduate school—to let me know that I am headed in the right direction.

“Who can separate his faith from his actions or his belief from his occupations. Who can spread his hours and say this for god and this for myself? This for my soul and this other for my body …. Your daily life is your temple and your religion. Take with you your all.” What kind of artist do I want to become? I want to be an artist who creates for his own spiritual well-being and for the benefit of his family and for society. A successful artwork should draw the viewer in, cause them to personally reflect and determine where they stand on a particular subject, not directly and immediately answer a question. As artist Shirin Neshat states, “I am an artist, not an activist. I am creating work simply to entice a dialogue . . . I am only asking questions.” It is I, the artist, and the viewers who must determine for ourselves what we will get from the work.

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