

## ABSTRACT

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In any artistic career there are a number of transitions that happen to a body of work. These transitions can often seem like disconnected leaps of the imagination, though they often occur through the challenging of personal boundaries. Personal and emotional boundaries are stretched and challenged by the confrontation of a new culture; this could include a body of new information or unusual surroundings.

We will observe the effects that moving to the United States of America has had on my work and the transitions that have taken place in this work as a result of my confrontation with this culture.

TRANSITIONS AND BOUNDARIES

By

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## Preface

We will observe the effects that a new context and culture has had on my drawing, and painting. Through the transition from Scotland to America I have found a number of things to become apparent about my working practice. I will discuss here the effect of being immersed in a different culture, its influence on my practice and I will later expand upon the evolution of my work within this context by examining key stages of its development.

Though I also produce sculpture and occasionally printmaking. I feel that the changes referred to in my style are more explicit in my paintings and drawings because of their obvious contrast to other works produced at a similar time.

When moving to a new place, something is inevitably left behind. Moving on can be a literal move or a metaphorical one. It is a catalyst, forcing a change of context that questions personal and emotional boundaries or can even highlight streams of thought that were perhaps hidden or suppressed within a different culture.

An introduction to a new culture forces a change of perspective, this change is an abrupt one to begin with, which ultimately gets slower as the mind becomes used to its surroundings. In some ways the perceived change of external circumstance becomes more apparent as it becomes possible to pause in reflection and contrast two ways of life, the newly forming and the old.

In a new environment it is natural to pause and reflect upon where other opportunities may have taken you. It is usually in this area of reflection where trauma or culture shock can occur; if a change in circumstance was preordained the mind will also contrast the newly forming set of circumstances not only with the old, but also with an imagined or idealized set. This idealization of imagined circumstance is useless, for there is rarely a way to change any set of given circumstances to fit an overly idealized model. Culture shock is useless to the creative mind unless it can highlight the unusual rather than regret or pine for the impossible.

Artists require input. The artist is a filter that sifts through streams of aural, visual and tactile material, the final distillation is presented through the form of a work of art. When this stream of input is perceived to change, and the artist becomes used to a new way of life, the work changes too. Artists are cultural formers who are also shaped by the culture they create. When a culture changes, so does an artist's work.

Therefore in the following discussions of my drawings, paintings and sculptures, we will inevitably cover these subsequent areas; personal boundaries and suppressed streams of thought; the use of a work of art as a tool for the artist's reflection; culture shock as a tool to analyze the unusual and the artist as a filter and distiller of cultural input.

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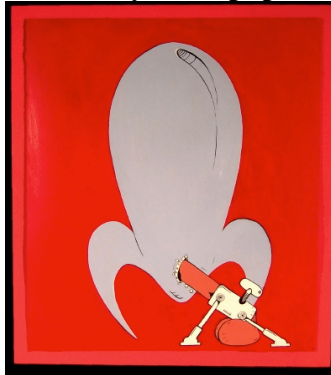
2) "Kiss and Ride", charcoal on paper



3) "Fuzzy Logic", mixed media on paper



4) "Cockrocket", acrylic on paper fixed to panel



5) "Angel", acrylic on paper fixed to panel



6) "St Sebastian", acrylic on panel





7) "The Red Hand", acrylic on panel



## Chapter 1: Notes on the Studio Environment

Upon moving to a new place one of the first and foremost concerns to an artist is to prepare a studio space. A studio is both an incubator for ideas and a space to present them. Although an artist is a filter of his surroundings, exposure to external influence can be extremely limited when an artist is isolated to the studio. Isolation, on the other hand, can act as a catalyst to the creative process in itself.

A studio is an incubator for ideas because it is a space where these ideas can be presented and juxtaposed with others to be edited and built upon. For a studio to be an active incubator there must be plenty of space for experimentation with materials and concepts to take place and it must have the capacity to be shut off from external influence. The area must be free from undesirable information, like static, unnecessary information can interfere with the creative process.

The graphological significance of mark making is important here. Every mark exhibits the personality that created it. In order to impart ownership to the studio, any subsequent mark to exist there had to belong solely to me. Therefore, in moving to my new studio, I found it necessary to make the space receptive to my ideas by cleansing it as much as I could of any previous artistic presence.

The studio that was allocated to me was at first filled with dust and curious concrete objects. A sculptor had used the space previously and so it took weeks to make that space mine. Boggled down by immigration bureaucracy, I found it satisfying to cleanse the walls of their previous identity and was happy in the knowledge that three

years later my studio would signify the personal and cultural journey that I had undertaken, a document of my artistic mark within itself. In many ways, my studio and its evolution has been a significant work of its own right.

The isolation inherent of a graduate program is a peculiar thing. This isolation is necessary but also detrimental to the notion of artists as filters or stills for pools of knowledge. After all, it is not possible to filter or distill information when there is little exploration of the new environment.

In any graduate program there is little in the way of personal time to explore an environment during a working week. Consider that much time is spent grading papers, dealing with bureaucracy and working in the studio. All of those events are particular to one building.

However, the isolation of a studio and academic environment is effective in providing time to reflect upon ideas and events. It is simply necessary to keep this time busy so as not to slip into an introverted personal reflection. Although personal reflection is valuable, it is valuable in a sense that it hones the decision-making process; “I should not have done that,” etc. It is necessary to minimize this introversion in order to concentrate on more current concerns relating directly to artistic practice.

Methods of limiting personal reflection in the studio involve making it a desirable and comfortable place to be. I found that installing a microwave, refrigerator and radio into the space made a great deal of difference. It is also important to fill the space with visual material that may instigate or effect ideas. If a new environment cannot

avail itself to the artist, then the artist must do all in his power to make it come to him.

Therefore, the studio is a place to transfer and incubate ideas. It is an important space to the artist. It must be comfortable and ready to become an exhibition space, a working space or a relaxation space. The evolution of a studio requires time and effort, it is an artwork in its own right: a documentation of the movements, marks and thoughts of an artist over time. A properly equipped studio should accommodate and facilitate the transitions that take place in an artist's thought process and working practice over any period of time.

## Chapter 2: Transitions through Developmental Drawing

Upon first moving to America, my primary works were drawings. I found that in observing my surroundings I began to rely more upon keeping a sketchbook or journal. I had to reset my creative process; I did not have the resources to immediately begin to paint. Therefore, drawing was the logical solution. Drawing was instilled into me as a transferable skill, a way of fleshing out ideas. Drawing became my crutch.

My sketchbook became more important in my new environment. I began to make lists and thumbnail sketches of unusual things that I had observed or paintings that I had always wished to make.

Some of the first things to appear as strange to me was advertising and signage. Not 'signage' in any post-modern sense but simply advertising signs or road signs. Pharmacists advertised, "Drugs": in the UK this would insinuate the illegal variety. Ambiguous road signs soliciting "Kiss and Ride". I also could not help but notice the pro-catholic fast food establishment, "Pope yes".

I was also aware of the unusual text particular to church signposts, and began to draw up proposals to build my own subversive counterparts. All of my observations relating to advertising and consumer/disposable culture spurred a new appreciation in the work of both Andy Warhol and Bruce Nauman.

As it stands however, the first finalized piece that I actually drew in my studio was reflective or introverted in nature. I drew a butterfly. One afternoon when I was in Scotland I found a butterfly that had died trying to escape the gallery that I was working in; it was tricked by the transparency of the windowpane. I slipped the butterfly into my sketchbook, where it remained until it fell out onto my desk in my new studio. As I looked at this butterfly, I was reminded of my homeland. Somehow this dead creature made my journey to the States poetic. The choice to draw the butterfly appealed to the previous sense of narrative contained within my work. I enjoyed the implicated narratives contained in the assemblages of Mark Dion and Susan Hiller. I fooled myself into believing that my drawing of the butterfly was a conceptual pursuit, in reality it was a glance backwards to a reliance on my traditional training, an avoidance of the context that I found myself in.



The reason that the drawing or context of the butterfly is important is because of the work that this drawing then propagated, which marked a transition in my process. Through my reliance on the traditional mark I realized that I was developing a coping strategy and avoiding the real issue of putting myself into my new context. I utilized the drawing of the butterfly as a symbol and placed it alongside pieces of text that I had appropriated from advertising signage. These pieces of text became icons to symbolize the culture that I now found myself in.



I was beginning to disconnect elements from their regular surroundings only to rearrange them with unusual objects or symbols related to my past. This was a natural process related to my search for commonalities in my surroundings.

My later works were to go through a different process. These drawings would become less allegorical in their use of imagery, yet more abstract.

I was aware that due to restricted resources my creative process was stagnating. In a bid to revitalize my working habits I endeavored to produce a series of works on paper related with a more fluid approach. That is meaning to say they were not directly related to any narrative event in my life.

I took the symbol of the fish from my previous drawing and decided to expand upon its shape. It was remarked to me that the fish looked like a breast, but it was not lost on me that some of the symbolism inherent in my work could be unrecognizable to an audience unfamiliar with my circumstances. The cultural ties to my new audience were simply different to those back home. Because of this disconnect, it became apparent from this work that a foray into an area unconstrained by narrative could unclog my process.

The following drawing is particularly illustrative of the transitory leap that I am attempting to describe. It was arrived at purely as a result of my encounter with American/British cultural symbolism and my desire to remove myself from the implied narrative contained in the use of those symbols.



In “Fuzzy Logic”, below, I started to flesh out boundaries by setting up and shutting down space. It could be argued that there is a narrative element, but this is certainly less obvious than in my previous works. I became interested in the fluidity of mark and the layering of those marks with different media to further contain and explore space.

The developing background here is also of significance. The implication of space through a developing pattern or semi-controlled series of marks is of importance because an environment is beginning to emerge, albeit in an abstract form.



The shape that is the focal point becomes the main device in a number of explorations of implied biological or sexual references. These references become important as I was beginning to gain an interest in the absurdity of censorship in popular American media. I was amazed that graphic, bloody violence would remain unedited whereas language that is perceived to be explicit is replaced with a dry and unenthusiastic voice. I needed to draw attention to this in an attempt to explore the boundaries of the society that I now found myself in.

These selected early sketches at Maryland are transitional pieces of work because they embody an attempt to resolve my thoughts and come to terms with my new working environment, they are contrasting because they signify precise stages where a realization or epiphany occurred. These developmental drawings provide a platform where I can go on to discuss paintings that explore further stages of my artistic growth.

### Chapter 3: Progress through Painting

Some of the most obvious changes particular to my work can be seen in my painting. As a continuation of the ideas instigated in my drawings, my paintings become more provocative in their nature.

The trigger for this provocation was the desire to produce a subversive painting to explore the idea of censorship and acceptability. This work would go on display at the Sadat art for peace exhibition at Maryland where the most successful work would be gifted to the ex-president of the Republic of Ireland.

My subversive strategy was to submit two artworks for the Sadat exhibition. One piece was called, “Cockrocket” and it was painted under the name Pseudo Neem. The foil for this entry was to be the drawing of the butterfly, “Freedom”, illustrated in the last chapter.



Despite my attempt to produce a stir at the Sadat exhibition, I found that I was happy with my foray into subversive painting. I enjoyed the uncomplicated composition and flattening of space with the use of cartoon imagery. It was a refreshing and unexpected change of direction. This transition continued into other paintings and sparked an investigation into the juxtaposition of cartoon and classical imagery, their implications and effects on the illusions of depth within painting.

I began to observe parallels in the imagery that I use with the Chicago School of artists. These artists were Jim Nutt, John Wesley, Carroll Dunham and of course the later work of Philip Guston. What excited me about those artists was their ability to mix the sinister with the humorous. Of course, this was what I was attempting to achieve; a seductive painting with dark subject matter.

Increasingly, American contemporary artists began to influence me. Barry McGee and Ryan McGinness, interested me in their appropriation and contextualization of symbols involving a passive historical commentary. Lately, Renee French, Eliabeth McGrath and Chris Mars have all ventured into the edgier side of humor; the idea that something serious and sinister is being said but in a disarmingly humorous way is a strategy that I have been continuing to hone.

With the influence of these artists, a reappraisal of spatial relationships began to happen in the environments of my paintings. This was coincidental to the return of my use of symbolism and materials to imply narrative or didactic content.



“Angel” saw the utilization of gold leaf to imply a reverential surface and was akin to the strategy of gold leafing used on renaissance panels. The environment is completely flattened again, though atmospheric perspective is implied. I suggested texture in the sky and ground by stamping my inked up boots across the painting’s surface. Note the framing of the composition in that the painting of the screw takes on the role of the icon.

Problems of space were researched further in my “St Sebastian” panel. Cartoon breasts appear in the foreground, crowded around a heart that is tied to a tree. The tree is slightly more rendered and the background is entirely modeled in a traditionally influenced glazing technique. The sucker dart is an addition to the surface to play with the idea that the heart is being impaled but nothing is actually penetrating the surface of the panel. “St. Sebastian” is my primary study into the relationship between the cartoon and classical and was influenced by a number of St Valentine’s Day cards that I designed.



The latest transition that occurred in my painting came out of a necessity to paint while on a trip back to Scotland; I was called upon to look after my Grandmother's house while she was in hospital. I needed to paint on a much smaller scale so that these works could be easily stored in my suitcase for my trip back to America.

I began to find that this scale suited my style. I was able to hold these paintings as precious objects while contemplating them. As I was able to get closer to them, I found that I could render a more complete environment. This led me to realize that the figuration in my environments did not need to be painted in solid color for them to reference cartoon or liberal ideologies. Indeed, these ideologies would be inferred by the entire visual content and could not be restricted to simple implementation of media.



The scale of this series of paintings makes them resemble icon painting. This reference is one that I enjoy as I readily pursue religious symbolism and liberal connotations.

It is indeed the circumstance that has helped define the content of my work. The substance of this painting is a religious symbol used by the protestant Unionists of Northern Ireland, “The red hand of Ulster”. The red hand is directly referred to in my painting as a red crosswalk signal against an angry, classically painted sky that alludes to the sublime; a vaginal, recessive space.

The direction of my work has therefore been primarily influenced by a realization of the influence of symbolic narrative to my work. This narrative can be subverted through an implementation of classical or cartoon painting strategies. In all however, it has been my personal circumstances that have made me consider a strategy of painting that is more natural to me in both scale and content.

It is my hope that the works that were briefly analyzed here have provided an insight into the transitions that my work has gone through and clarified the reasons for those changes of direction.