TREAD SOFTLY: A STUDY OF THE UNCONTROLLABLE

by

Kylie M. Martin

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the Requirements for Departmental Honors in
The College of Fine Arts
Texas Christian University
Fort Worth, Texas

May 4, 2015
TREAD SOFTLY: A STUDY OF THE UNCONTROLLABLE

Project Approved:

Supervising Professor: Susan Harrington, M.F.A.
Department of Painting

Adam Fung, M.F.A.
Department of Painting

Leo Munson, Ph. D
Office of the Provost
ABSTRACT

To live is to be a part of something unpredictable. The fear of loss of control is an anxiety that plagues many to different degrees. For some it is an occasional worry, for others it is a debilitating rumination that causes physical symptoms. As human beings, we naturally strive to impose controls and structure on our environment, even though there are many events and situations that are outside of our influence. This thesis explores this daily phenomenon through the mediums of photography and painting. It draws from personal experiences, focusing on how the lives of a college student and particular abandoned house become intricately intertwined. Most importantly, it explores why these structures are a necessity, and what happens when these structures fail.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the Honors College for giving me this opportunity.
I would like to thank my friends for accompanying me to the house and standing by my side, even though it seemed for awhile like I was trying to paddle upstream without a paddle. You know who you are.
I would like to thank Devon Nowlin; if it weren’t for you, your mentorship, and the Design and Color class, I would not have taken the risk of pursuing my dreams.
I would like to thank Dr. Leo Munson, for his mentorship, friendship, and continued support, from before horned frog to the hereafter.
I would like to thank Professor Adam Fung; even though we were only able to work together for a few semesters, I am thankful for all of the painting wisdom, the motivating kicks in the butt, and the endless supply of sarcasm.
I would like to thank Professor Susan Harrington, who taught me about color theory, investigation, and to not be afraid to take leaps of faith. You have given me a confidence in my work, and your faith in me has been a constant motivation. I will never stop making.
Finally, I would like to thank my family, especially my aunt, uncle, mother, father, and brother. Thank you for continuing to believe in your ‘brave little toaster.’
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

FOUR YEARS IN REVIEW.................................................................6  
  The Beginning...............................................................................7  
  Encounters..................................................................................7  
  Previous Projects and References..............................................10  

THE SERIES..................................................................................14  
  Investigations................................................................................14  
  Conceptualization.........................................................................17  
  Influences.....................................................................................19  
  Process..........................................................................................19  

RESULTS.......................................................................................21  

CONCLUSION..................................................................................26  

REFERENCES................................................................................27
FOUR YEARS IN REVIEW
The Beginning

During my freshman year of college, I was driving to visit my aunt and uncle in Weatherford, Texas, about thirty minutes or so outside of Fort Worth. It was a bright and sunny day, and if I remember correctly, it must have recently rained, as the wild vegetation was very green. I turned off of the farm-to-market road and onto another that leads to several neighborhoods. I remember looking to my right, and in the corner lot, catching this glimpse of a rooftop engulfed by foliage. I remember my curiosity being instantly piqued. I wondered about the house and what it looked like, and I also wondered about its strange placement in the neighborhood. This unkempt and overgrown house was juxtaposed with these well-maintained family lots and ranch properties. They seemed to occupy two different worlds. Throughout the rest of the year, and every time I would visit my relatives in Weatherford, the house remained at the back of my mind.

Encounters

After declaring Studio Art to be my major, I began to take classes to fulfill my core requirements in my department my sophomore year. I was enrolled in a photography class in the fall, and when I was working on a particular assignment, I thought of the house and how well its aesthetics would fulfill it. My friend and I made the drive over, and the seasonal changes that the house experienced were incredible. All of the wild ivy and local brush that had consumed the house during the warmer months had completely
disappeared. I was seeing the house without its foliage veil, and it was skeletal and vulnerable in nature. My friend and I feverishly began to explore the property.

The house was one story, with four separate rooms, (a living room, dining/kitchen area, and a bedroom and bathroom). We also discovered more than just the house on the property. There was what looked to be a well and a concrete block shack that contained some form of plumbing directly behind it, a tool and storage shed further back, and the remnants of an old chicken coop at the start of the tree line. We made our way back into the house to document the rooms further. The peculiar aspect about the interior was not the deterioration or seeing the bare structure in some of the rooms per-say, the most striking example happened unintentionally in the photograph above. At the time I was simply doing a silhouette study of my friend in a window, but after spending time with the photographs from the shoot, I realized that there was much more happening than just
a silhouette. I took notice of the curling wallpaper to the right, and how the tree print and the branches crawling through the window subtly echoed each other. Even after what seemed like decades of abandonment to the elements, small evidence of human touch still remained. This idea of the human touch and the uncontrollable directly contrasting each other would become integral in my line of thinking later on.

Once my second year was complete, I made another trip on my own out to the property to document the seasonal changes once more. I began to directly compare the differences between the appearance and vitality of the house during the summer months as compared to the fall. I would edit and look at the pictures from each photoshoot side by side. This second photoshoot would mark an evolution in my process involving the house, from simply using the photographs for a photograph-specific assignment, to repurposing them as reference material.
The first documented leap to reference material was coincidentally during another class that I was taking for my department’s core. Printmaking, (screen-printing in particular), was a class I had been dreading, but by the end I had grown significantly as an artist. The screen print to the right is titled *Two-Faced*, and is an edition of five. The process I was using was very similar to a painting technique dating back to the old masters. It begins with a monotone value study, because in this case it is a range of white to black it is called a ‘grisaille.’ After it dries, very thin glazes of paint are applied in subsequent layers. Light will travel through these glazes and to the bottom value layer, giving the illusion of value in color. Layer one flat glaze of blue over a sphere value study done in grisaille, and it will look like you painted the sphere using different tints and shades of blue. This technique has been used for centuries to achieve an unmatched color richness, especially when certain colors were unavailable or yet to be conceived. To better understand the multi-layer screen-printing process, I approached it with
this mindset.

Screen-printing was very process heavy, so for the sake of brevity I will glaze over minute technicalities. The first step was source material. When I was comparing both the fall and summer photoshoot, I realized that I had taken a photograph approaching the front of the house from nearly the same angle in both seasons, shown below. I decided to use these as source material to show the transformative nature of the house.

I made several transparencies for the value ranges in the photos, from the lightest to the darkest colors. For each transparency, I would expose it to extreme light
underneath a screen that was prepared with photo emulsion—a light sensitive chemical that would harden in every area except for the pieces that the transparencies blocked in black. I would wash out these areas, and push ink through the screen and onto paper to create each layer. The lighter colors were the bottom most layers and the largest areas, the dark grays and blacks the smallest, and glaze of red the last. I repeated that process eight separate times to achieve the range of value present in *Two-Faced*.

![Image](image_url)

*Two-Faced* was a study in the transformative qualities of the house, and my focus turned to recording its atmosphere when I used the images as references for my paintings. My first painting of the property was *Weatherford House*, (pictured above), a small square oil paint study of the house’s front entry. However, my purpose in painting the atmosphere was for the viewer to have the same all-consuming experience that I did upon stepping from outside into the interior. I experimented with this through enlarging the size of my work. This resulted in a six foot tall painting titled *Be Still*, (pictured below).
The increase in size forced the painting to serve as another environment for the viewer, and not just a flat window to look through. For example, the window cavity in *Be Still* is large enough for the viewer to squeeze through and enter the interior, whereas the same is not true for *Weatherford House’s* doorway.
Towards the end of my junior year, I began to deeply consider why I was attracted to the house’s seasonal transformations and the strange atmosphere it projected onto its surroundings. I started to wonder what was so significant here, that I would return to this same location for three consecutive years. In the conceptual thinking involved in my creative process, I strive to touch all bases and make sure that every detail is considered, and every question answered. So I started my investigation with an introspective line of thinking. I came up with a basic list of questions I needed to answer for myself before I could continue. These included:

Why this particular house?
What does it represent?
Why am I drawn here?

The first question I was able to answer is what the house represents. I began to think objectively; the house is a human structure, and it is placed into an environment to provide shelter. After asking myself why, (besides the obvious physiological reasons), that this is advantageous to do, I came to the conclusion that shelter provides us with a semblance of control over our environment. I continued to push my thinking further. If a house is a control, then what happens when that house is abandoned and left to the
natural elements? How would I categorize the house in Weatherford? Thus I arrived at a new conclusion; the Weatherford house is a physical human structure that nature is actively reclaiming. It was like watching a car wreck in slow motion; I knew that eventually this beautiful house would deteriorate into nothingness, but I could not take my eyes away. However it was not just a morbid fascination that drove me back to the property year after year, so I continued digging.

I thought about why, on a more general and personal level, that I would need to maintain control of a situation. I came up with the conclusion that ultimately it would be to evade the sometimes extreme anxiety when control is lost. But I had to see if others were having similar experiences, so I conducted some interviews. In the interviews I asked these questions:

1. “What is the first image that comes to mind when you think of illness? Any sounds that accompany that image?”
2. “How do you respond to the thought of illness? To the thought of you or your family contracting an illness, (whether serious or just a head cold)? To the thought of illness on a large scale, (a pandemic for example)?”
3. “What is the first image that comes to mind when you think of natural disaster? Any sounds that accompany that image?”
4. “How do you respond to the thought of natural disaster? To the thought of it happening to you or your family? To the thought of it happening to a stranger?”
5. “Have you experienced any natural disasters first-hand? If so, how did you react to the event, and the aftermath?”
6. “How do you respond to figures of authority? (Such as your parents when you were in their household, your boss, professors, etc.)”

7. “What degree of control do you feel that you need to have to be comfortable in everyday life?”

Analyzing the interviews as a whole, I came to the realization that there were both physical and emotional structures present that interviewees and myself would construct. First, and sometimes easier to identify, are the physical: as they are visual borders and structures. Theses can include houses, buildings, sea walls, ships, cars, streets and roads; namely anything that is manmade that provides a control on the environment in some degree. Houses, for instance, allow us to control the weather, (to some extent, severe weather can wreck any structure-manmade or natural). Walls impose control in several different ways. They can be oppressive, (contain the human/natural element), definitive of spaces, (outline the borders of an area), but also supportive, (to build upon or stabilize an existing natural or manmade structure), and so on. Transportation structures impose control by eliminating some of the human and natural elements, (it is typically not a natural occurrence for a human being to fly at a rate of several hundred miles per hour, but the airplane has made it possible). In the interviewee’s case, the physical structure most mentioned were houses, and the anxiety derived from losing them. For instance, the first interviewee’s answer to question three: “I guess I would have to say all those photos that you see on the Red Cross website of the sad, battered kids standing amongst the rubble of their home…”

We are not in control of the actions and thoughts of others, thus this can be a great source of anxiety. Emotional barriers can range from subtle to direct depending on the
personality constructing them. They typically have a purpose of either protecting ourselves from vulnerability, or protecting another from ourselves. Examples of these can be found in these interviewee’s answers. For instance, I asked questions on how interviewees would react to natural disaster happening to strangers to discern if they put emotional distance between themselves and other human beings to protect themselves.

The fifth interviewee responded to question four responding to natural disasters, “…if it is happening to strangers it really only matters if they are in my vicinity or not.” This is an emotional construct to protect the interviewee from experiencing the same psychological distress of his fellow human beings.

Conceptualization

I took the information and subsequent conclusions that I gathered from the investigating I did, and began to synthesize it into a focused series. The house and I had now been changing alongside each other for nearly four years, and so I thought it best to reflect upon my personal history in order to better understand the relationship. I still needed to answer why I was drawn here.

I knew already that I was first drawn to the house because of the property’s odd place it held right beside well kept ranches. Once I became more acquainted, its transformative nature mesmerized me. The extreme seasonal changes intrigued me as if I was seeing two opposites juxtaposed. The most important element of the house, however, became its atmosphere. When I would regularly walk into an inhabited house, I could discern bits and pieces about the inhabitant’s personality simply with the objects they surrounded themselves. The house was almost completely devoid of that, so I was at a
loss of understanding of how to interpret the interior. As I was sieving through my personal history, (that of a military child relocated eleven times before attending university), I came to the realization that the only consistencies in my childhood were my family and the objects that followed us from house to house. Ultimately, I concluded I was drawn to the property in Weatherford because it was the longest relationship that I had maintained with a house, and it had thus become a home to me. All that was missing was the personal human touch that the objects from my childhood could provide.

We take photographs of people we cherish, objects we love, and events we do not want to forget. As this was now a home, I decided that aesthetically, photography was the best way to preserve it. Painting in objects that surrounded me in childhood, I could alter the memory of the house. I knew that the house would ultimately deteriorate, and so to preserve it, I could begin the process of letting go. It became an experiment in embracing the loss of control and subsequent anxiety that we consistently evade.
Influences

My main source of influence was a book titled *In Camera* by Martin Harrison. It had a collection of photographs and source material that the artist Francis Bacon surrounded himself with in his cramped and cluttered studio space. Many of the photographs had stray paint marks and footprints on them, and this was the catalyst that lead to my choice to paint directly on the photographs, rather than placing objects physically in the environment. I also surrounded myself with reference books on Guiseppe Penone, Lucian Freud, Ed Moses, and Julie Mehretu.

Process

I photographed the house’s interior and exterior one last time. I then had the photographs printed; they were four inches tall and six inches wide on luster paper, recalling the glossy photographs I grew up handling in photo albums as a child. I sealed
these photographs with a clear gesso. (proper application will result in a surface that paint cannot penetrate, making it more archival). I then chose from a wall of the photographs an assortment of rooms, windows, and closets, and began to paint specific objects from my childhood into them. The resulting photographs
RESULTS

Institutional Wall Paint

Jack’s Toy
Pepto Bismal Pink

The Blue Star Banner
Two Hangers and a Hole in the Roof

Blinds
Origins

Laminate Kitchen Floors
Blue Curtains
CONCLUSION

This is a life in unrelenting transition.

This is concrete, this is permanence, that I will soon be gone.

I am not sad that I have spent my life leaving,

What hurts the most is what I have left behind.

Perhaps now I will be one step closer to finding peace.
REFERENCES


Interview One, Personal interview. 17 March 2014.

Interview Five, Personal interview. 17 March 2014.
