

OCCUPY MOUDY

By

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OCCUPY MOUDY

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ABSTRACT

Occupy Moudy is the culmination of my studies encompassing painting, installation and performance art over the past two years. The work evolved from painting on stretched canvas to un-stretched paintings on paper, installation, and performance. Inspired by the Occupy Wall Street movement, the works are also informed by art historical movements and styles such as deconstruction, color field abstraction, relational aesthetics and artist activism.

VITA

Zoetina Rebecca Veal was born March 15, 1970 in Macon, Georgia. She is the daughter of Homer Jerome Veal, Sr. and Pamela Zoetina Veal. She is also the granddaughter of Rufus and Sara Veal, James and Rebecca Cross, and the great granddaughter to Cotis and Rae Brown.

A 1988 graduate of Minot Senior High School, Minot, North Dakota, she received a Bachelor of Arts degree with a major in Economics from Stanford University in Palo Alto, California in 1993.

She worked at the Stanford University, Robert Crown Law Library from 1993 to 1996 before entering the Cooperative Education MBA program at Northeastern University in Boston that same year. A financial analyst internship at Texas Instruments Inc. brought her to Dallas for six months in early 1997. She returned to Northeastern in the summer of 1997 to complete her MBA studies, and then returned to Dallas in 1998 to work for Texas Instruments full-time in the Semiconductor line of business.

From 1999 to 2010, she labored as a financial analyst, consultant and accountant at various corporations and small business such Campbell Consulting Group, EnduraCare LLC, and Aramark Correctional Services LLC before resigning from J.P. Morgan Chase in early 2010 to dedicate herself completely to becoming an artist.

She is a member of the Stanford Alumni Association, Northeastern Alumni Association and the College Art Association.

OCCUPY MOUDY THESIS EXHIBITION

To maintain, or in some cases acquire and regain, relevance in many areas of contemporary life, it is my belief that artists must be actively involved in the sociopolitical construction of the institutions, both cultural and political, that serve individuals and communities locally, nationally and globally.

Propagated by the highly influential art critic, Clement Greenberg, modernist ideology demands the self-referential investigation of distinct mediums and leaves no room for subject matter or content not directly related to said medium. During modernism's heyday (roughly 1910 to 1960) the art world was, and still is in many respects, dominated by the notion that art should be void of politics, religion, expression, romanticism, etc. Although we are currently in a postmodernist and pluralistic art world, many institutions of higher learning have been slow to adopt a more inclusive definition of what art is and can be. The tendency is to maintain the old divisions (i.e. painting vs. sculpture vs. photography vs. installation, etc.) with little-to-no overlap. This dogged adherence to the status quo with the dominant silos of painting and sculpture firmly cemented in place creates an environment that is difficult in which to create and be creative, which are not the same thing.

In the fall semester of 2011, a senior member of the TCU College of Fine Arts administration gave the order to remove an undergraduate student's artwork from the doors of bathroom stalls. The "questionable" artwork consisted of a picture of a stall post on the stall that the picture was taken. The photograph was disposed of, trashed, not even returned to the student. When I heard of this event, I was absolutely dumbfounded and outraged. To the student's credit, she turned the whole debacle into an artwork including the emails between

the administrators. Even while accepting the fact that TCU is located in a conservative town in one of the most conservative states, censorship and destruction of student artwork should never occur in a visual art department. Also, in a contemporary art world where many successful artists have bodies of work consisting of two or more media, students should be encouraged, not discouraged, to explore more than one medium and to even mix media. Couple all that with the daily ritual of polishing the first floor and admonishments to not get paint on the floors and walls, I was not surprised that students have expressed to me that the academic environment sometimes feels oppressive.

Despite the aforementioned constraints, *Occupy Moudy Thesis Exhibition* was born midway through the final semester of my MFA program, although the seeds had been planted long before. As an undergraduate at Stanford University from 1988 to 1993, I was a member of the Black Student Union, which was the most active black-student organization nationally. Never one to be outspoken, I was just a foot soldier working in the headquarters, aptly named the Black House, as an administrative assistant, treasurer of the annual black cultural event Club Ujamaa¹ one year, and occasional marcher. Modeled after the student protests and occupations of the 1960s and 1970s, we marched for more African-American history courses, more professors of color and we participated in the Western Culture debates by advocating for the inclusion of authors of color in the Great Works canon of literature. Inclusion, diversity, respect for the needs of students and fostering discourse and action concerning campus, national and even international issues were the goals.

¹ “Ujamaa cannot be directly translated into English. Its literal meaning in Swahili varies, but generally it refers to family or brotherhood.” Source: Fred G. Burke, “Tanganyika: The Search for Ujamaa,” *African Socialism*, editors William H. Friedland and Carl G. Rosberg, Jr. (Palo Alto, CA: Hoover Institution, 1964), 194.

This activist background, coupled with the 2007 economic recession, spurred by widespread corruption and predatory lending in the mortgage industry, morphed into the 2008 – 2012 Global Financial Crisis (GFC), provided the seeds for *Occupy Moudy*.

In July 2007, I was terminated without cause or reason from a position I held for five years at Aramark Corporation. That event, which precipitated my own financial crisis and the eventual loss of my house to foreclosure, was the inspiration for *Aramark: The Art of Termination* (Plate II). Up to then, my entire corporate career in finance and accounting was ruled by the Microsoft Excel spreadsheet software, which inspired *Excel* (Plate I). The GFC, which is ongoing, is considered to be the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression. It unleashed amongst the general public, a.k.a. the 99%, a tidal wave of anger toward the super wealthy 1%. In particular, the Bush II Administration's bailout of the Wall Street banks coupled with the Obama Administration's inability or unwillingness to reign in those same banks and hold them accountable for the loans each received from taxpayers inspired the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) protests in New York City's financial district in September 2011. The OWS movement has become a leaderless, diffused, and, some say, confused movement that inspired splinter protests in major cities across the United States and Europe. Because of direct personal experience, I felt and still feel a kinship with the 99%. I am the 99%.

As a sign of solidarity with the OSW movement, I staged my own occupation to draw the TCU community's attention to the unemployment and homelessness resulting from the continuing economic crisis and to remind us that a war is still raging in Afghanistan. These events inspired *Army of One Tent City* (Plate IV and V) and *Untitled (Unit G-10, Security Self Storage, Dallas, TX)* (Plate III). Real world issues such as these tend not to, in my opinion, penetrate the higher education bubble. Pressed with immediate concerns such as

studies, tests and deadlines, we students tend to forget about the world just beyond the boundaries of campus. Awareness and discourse about these issues were the goal of *Occupy Moudy*. In addition, I wanted to break down symbolically the wall between painting, sculpture, installation and performance. Each work in my show is a gesture relating to each discipline, grouped together in one exhibition, and inspired by artists Hans Haacke (installation, institutional critique), Mark Bradford (abstract painting, sculpture), Jasper Johns (painting, sculpture), and Chris Burden (performance), to name a few.

I was familiar with and influenced by these artists well before conceiving *Occupy Moudy*. Because I drew upon these artists, I expected my exhibition to generate a certain degree of controversy. I did not, however, anticipate the many enlightening and touching conversations with visitors that I experienced during the five-day run of the exhibition, when I literally occupied Moudy Gallery. A graphic design professor told me the history of the American flag that was the centerpiece of *Untitled (Unit G-10, Security Self Storage, Dallas, TX)* (Plate III). It is a coffin flag, which can be deduced because it is elongated, and the fact that it only has 48 stars dates it back to the World War II era. These facts added greater weight to the piece and spoke directly to the issue of war. An undergraduate student, when speaking with me about *Army of One Tent City* (Plate IV and V), revealed that she often felt oppressed by the atmosphere in Moudy. The 48-star flag also elicited a reference to Jasper John's flags, all of which have 48 stars. An ex-Marine studying business on the GI-Bill said that he was moved by the upside down flag. He immediately got the reference to the United States being in a state of distress.

These interactions and many others enriched my own experience of the exhibition. On the fourth day, I was visited by one of the professors of art history who informed me that

the exhibition touched upon several art movements that I was not aware of previously. The performance aspect of actually occupying the gallery and interacting with the visitors is a gesture from relational aesthetics.² Living in the gallery and making one's self available to visitors creates a human connection. Each participant gives and takes in a circle of generosity. I believe those conversations completed the exhibition.

The piece *Results of My Labor* (Plate VI) harkens back to Kasimir Malevich's monochrome abstractions and the French art movement Supports/Surfaces. Artists of this movement, driven by the feeling that painting had still not come to terms with its most basic conventions, postmodernism resolved to "show what was hidden, to deconstruct and individualize each of its elements"³ by reducing painting to canvas and stretcher. Working un-stretched and draping were important gestures, according to art historian Dr. Frances Colpitt who visited me on the fourth day of my occupation.⁴ My work also has an affinity with that of the artist Leonardo Drew.⁵ He uses the detritus of life in a simultaneous painterly and sculptural manner.

The detritus of my life prior to graduate school figures prominently in *Occupy Moudy*. Because of its versatility and abundance, paper became the primary support for my paintings in my last few months at Brookhaven College and my first year at TCU. There is something sensual and skin-like about paper, especially the brown paper bag.

Sometime ago, affluent African-Americans used the brown paper bag as a skin color "measuring stick" to determine admittance to college or membership in upper crust social

² See Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Les Presses du reel, 2004).

³ See Raphael Rubinstein, "The Painting Undone: Supports/Surfaces," *Polychrome Profusion: Selected Art Criticism: 1990 – 2002* (Lenox, MA: Hard Press Editions, 2004). Source: <http://www.artcritical.com/2004/02/01/the-painting-undone-supportssurfaces/>

⁴ Dr. Frances Colpitt is the Deedie Potter Rose Chair of Art History at TCU.

⁵ See website source: <http://www.leonardodrew.com/exhib.html>

clubs, fraternities and sororities. If your skin were lighter than a brown paper bag, you would be declared fit to belong. I found it intriguing that such a cheap item would be used to catapult a person into elite company. When I was a child, I carried my lunch to school in a brown paper bag instead of a nifty plastic or tin lunch pale. It was a symbol of being lower class, which is where, coming full circle, I find myself. Also, we used newspaper to drain the grease from fried catfish/chicken, to clean mirrors and windows, not “fancy” paper towels. It is for these cultural, economic, and personal historical reasons that I use paper in my artwork (Plates II and VI).

The large paper pieces, *Aramark: The Art of Termination* (Plate II) and *Results of My Labor* (Plate VI) are composed of a layer of barrier paper fortified with a layer of the *Wall Street Journal* newspaper. This paper creation is painted with a 3-layer mixture of gesso and acrylic primer house paint. The absorption of water from the acrylic paint causes the paper to wrinkle giving it a skin-like texture. Alternating between the wall and the floor, the painting is worked (painted, folded, sanded, varnished) and handled roughly sometimes causing the edges to crinkle and tear. When smaller paper works are not “working” on their own, these pieces are collaged to create a larger work, which is the case with *Results of My Labor* (Plate VI).

The layers of paint make the paper quite heavy. Grommets and cotton bed sheets bind it together and serve doubly as formal elements of the piece and support. These paper constructions are difficult to handle and require a degree of wrestling them from the wall to the floor and back to the wall again dozens of times before completion. This physical labor

that I put into these pieces is important. It is *my* labor directed by *me* for *my benefit*, not the corporation that I left in February, 2010.⁶

Although the works in the exhibition were comprised of many ready-made objects (Plates III, IV and V) and mixed media materials, such as paper, oil, acrylic, grommets and canvas (Plates I, II and VI), materialization and objecthood are not necessarily the end goals. Those “things,” coupled with *Occupy Moudy's* integration of performance, audience interaction and discourse, aimed to lead visitors to a heightened awareness of social and political issues facing the nation. My hope is that the exhibition helped precipitate action, resulting in change that is beneficial to the individual and the larger community.

⁶ In February 2010, I resigned from my job as an Independent Auditor at J.P. Morgan Chase. Independent Auditor is just a fancy work for data entry clerk and fact checker. Independent is a misnomer that allows the corporation to deny benefits and vacation pay.

PLATES



Plate I

Excel
Acrylic on linen
72 x 36 inches
2012

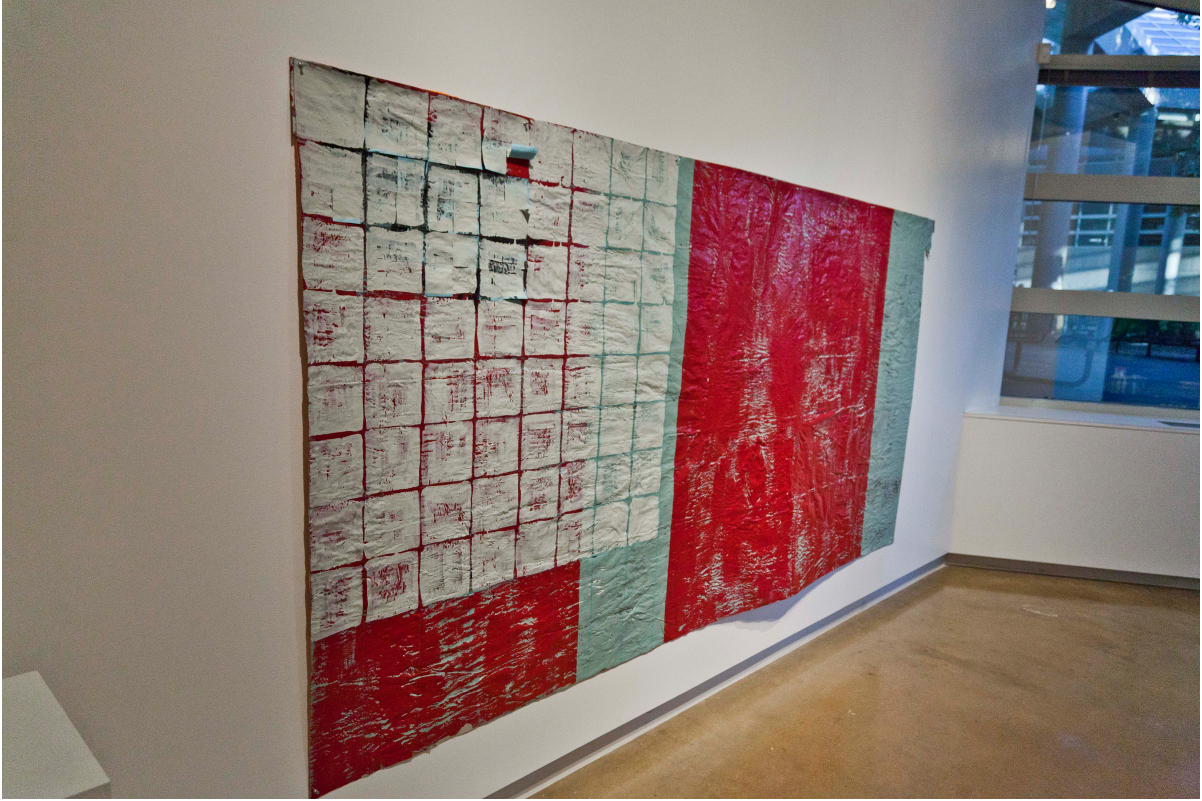


Plate II

Aramark: The Art of Termination

Mixed Media

(Paper, newspaper, post-it notes, push pins, acrylic, cotton fabric, grommets)

96 x 120 inches

2012



Plate III

Untitled (Unit G-10, Security Self Storage, Dallas, TX)

Installation

(American coffin flag, bed frame, table, glass pitcher of lemonade, plastic cups, bench, folding chairs, bench, iron stools, wooden stools)

Dimensions Variable

2012



Plate IV



Plate V

Army of One Tent City (Moudy Gallery, Fort Worth, TX)

Performance / Installation

(Sofa bed, pillows, blankets, coffee table, house keys, rug, ottomans, end tables, lamps, rocking chair, tent, daybed mattress, pillow, lawn chair)

Dimensions Variable

2012



Plate VI

Results of My Labor

Mixed Media

(Paper, newspaper, oil, acrylic, tape, cotton fabric, grommets)

80.5 x 130 inches

2012