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by

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Threshold Artifacts

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Threshold Artifacts

by

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Report

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Dedication

This Report is dedicated to the memory of my father, David Gene Brandt, and my mother, Barbara Jean Quinn (ne Bogen).

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This work would not have been possible without the guidance and support of several distinguished individuals, including, but not limited to my therapist and most trustworthy guide in life, Robert M. Johnson, MA, LPC; the love of my life and number one supporter, Elizabeth Crane Brandt; my Committee Chair, Jeff Williams; and the Professor that unlocked the mysteries of Modern Abstraction for me and others, Linda D. Henderson, Ph.D.

Abstract

Threshold Artifacts

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2012

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This Master's Thesis Report is a discussion of the ideas and processes that I have researched and explored during the past three years at the University of Texas at Austin. This exploration has led to a body of work that examines how materials, images and processes address the boundaries between physical and spiritual worlds. Fundamental to that inquiry is the use of mythology as a tool to decode and interpret signs that point to an experience of the transcendent that is outside the realm of language.

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An important theme in my research and work, because of the death of my parents at an early age, is death and loss. I am personally aware of consciousness apart from thinking, and have developed a way of thinking about the nature of matter, energy, and spirit that incorporates a vast world of the unseen and unknown that is connected in some way to our own. Joseph Campbell states in conversation with Bill Moyers, that the whole known world rests on a foundation of the unknowable.¹ I think of the body as a vessel for a consciousness that has its own source in the fundamentally mysterious plane. I believe that consciousness enters this world through a valve that is connected to this other world. The world of the living and the world of the dead are parallel worlds. Work like *Flowers (Scrimmed)* and *Untitled (Flower Stencil)* address the “screen” between these two worlds.



Figure 1: *Flowers (Scrimmed)*, acrylic on canvas, 64x48”, 2010 and *Untitled (Flower Stencil)*, spray paint, wire, plywood, 68x48x10”, 2010

¹ Joseph Campbell, with Bill Moyers, *The Power of Myth*, 1988.

In *Flowers (Scrimmed)*, an image of a shadow cast by a bucket of flowers is projected on a white scrim. The painting is made with an airbrush on a wet-sanded, gessoed canvas, so that it has a milky, smooth surface. *Untitled (Flower Stencil)* has the same image but the positive form has been removed from a sheet of plywood and used as a stencil. The image is not present; it is a void. Instead, the negative space of the image is presented as a raw physical form. The materiality of the image is heightened by propping the plywood on the floor, against the wall. The light and shadow cast on the wall vibrates with the soft focus “image”, made softer by the traces of spray paint that remain at the edges of the cut out image.

The idea of a boundary between two worlds is present again in two photographs of text written into steam on a condensation-covered picture window. The image of trees and gray sky outside is made hazy and indistinct by the fogged glass. A short two-word phrase is drawn with a finger: “MERE MATTER”, and “KNOCK KNOCK” on another. The phrase “Mere Matter” is ironic; the simple physical materials in the image refer both to the transformation of matter into image and allude to a yearning to connect with a transcendent source of matter (Figure 2). This idea becomes more playful in other works in this series. Gestural marks and smudges were made by our dog’s nose on the glass: it’s art made by an animal, but it’s also an oracle, like reading tea leaves, an effort to communicate with the other side by interpreting signs.

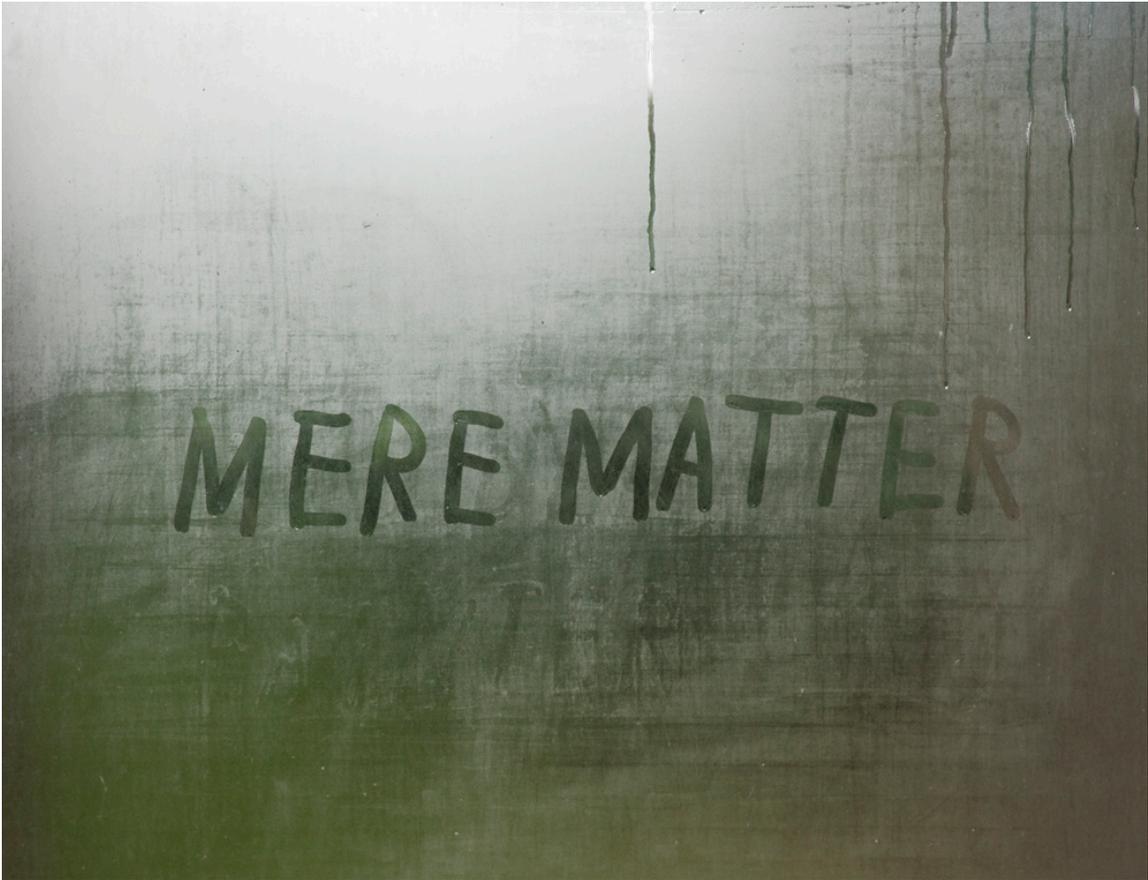


Figure 2: *Mere Mortal*, digital inkjet print, 24x33", 2010

It's also a non-verbal message from my dog, made while he waits for me to come home and in the excitement of sensing my return. The fact that the image is made visible when the form is covered with fluid particles is a phenomenon that recurs again later in my work.

Early in the program, I became obsessed with, attributed to the Greek sculptor Lysippos. A plaster cast of a Roman marble copy the Greek bronze original is in the collection of the Blanton Museum at the University of Texas at Austin. It is an example of a votive sculpture, commissioned by a wealthy patron to be made as an offering to the gods. It depicts an athlete scraping sweat and dirt from the underside of his arm with a

strigil. There are several different aspects of this work that correlate to and inform my own work. One is the performative and process-oriented aspect of the gesture of scraping. The athlete performs the action for the viewer, here, the process of removing an accumulation of dirt and oil. It might also be noted here that these are the basic ingredients of paint. He is transforming himself in the process, going from dirty to clean, but within the perspectival frame of history, the gesture also alludes to the fact this sculpture, and ones like it, were actually painted. The monochrome white surface that we have come to associate with ancient Greek and Roman Sculpture and architecture was not in fact the way that they were presented in their own era. It is difficult for us as modern viewers to gain access to the original intent and significance of work like this because of historical and cultural distance; the custom of making art as an offering is foreign to modern sensibilities. As well, the changes that a work like this have gone through in it's translation through material and different unknown sculptor's hands has put the original version of this sculpture at a great distance from us. In response, I have made several different prints that depict this sculpture. The first version was an intaglio print wherein the figure of *The Scrapper* is printed with a shaped plate so that the figure floats in its relation to the ground of the image. It also separated slightly by the embossment of the plate into the paper, which creates a slight vibration between the two and three-dimensional aspects of the artwork. The plate and its drawing of the figure were also aquatinted to achieve a uniformly dark tone through which the line drawing is faintly discernable. In a second large digital inkjet print of this image of *The Scrapper*, I depicted the sculpture in its setting in the museum and converted the photographic image with a very low-resolution halftone screen so that at a close viewing distance, the image is made indistinct by a harsh vibration of contrasting black and white dots.

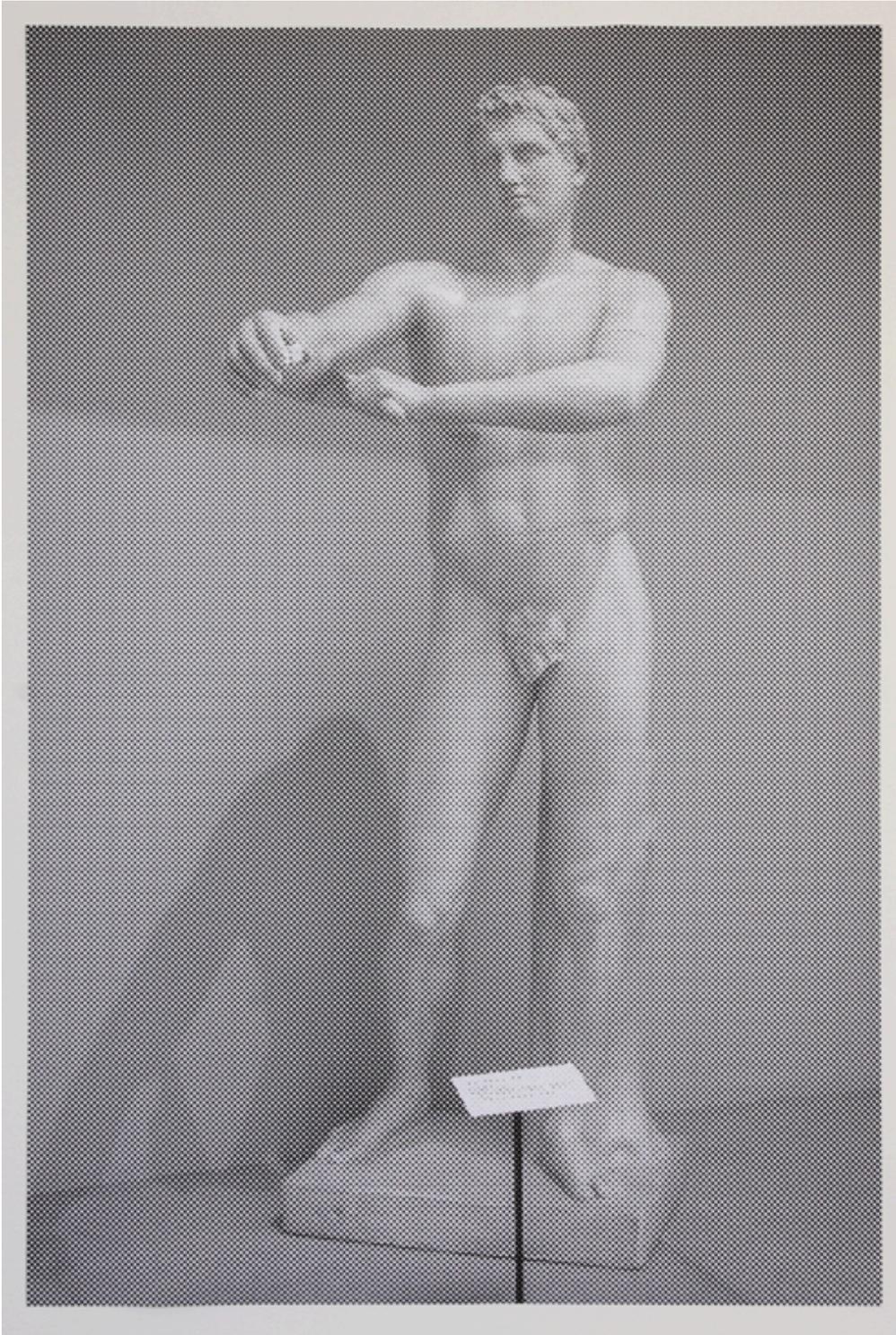


Figure 3: *Apoxyomenos (The Scraper)*, digital inkjet print, 48x34", 2010.

Virtually no detail information can be discerned. As the viewing distance increases, the image and its details begin to coalesce, creating a paradoxical effect wherein the image is clearer at a distance. The halftone screen is another “screen” that separates us from the world of the sculptor and his subject. The sculpture becomes a mysterious and elusive ghost. Another series of prints was made spray-painting a variety of different plaids and other repeating designs that were suggestive of cloth prints. Over these were silkscreened an image of *The Scraper*, and again, the museum setting was signified by the title placard within the image.

In an effort to represent the world beyond the screen of everyday reality, I made a work that metaphorically addresses the source of all the energy in the universe titled *The Source (It's Happy All the Way Down, Stupid)*. It is a bright orange painting on canvas that has a truss-like aluminum frame that holds the canvas off the wall about eight inches. Previous to this, bright colors were almost never used in my work; the orange signals something unusual. No image is presented in this monochrome painting except the object itself. No brushwork or traces of the artist's hand are visible; it is void. It is presented as stretched canvas on a frame, there is nothing unusual about the back of the painting. It is a floating field of physical color, and it is an object with a particular size and shape.



Figure 4: *The Source (It's Happy All the Way Down, Stupid)*, acrylic on canvas, aluminum, 64x50x10", 2010.

The title comes from an apocryphal story that addresses the philosophical paradox of infinite regress. The most widely known version appears in Stephen Hawking's 1988 book *A Brief History of Time*, which reads:

A well-known scientist (some say it was Bertrand Russell) once gave a public lecture on astronomy. He described how the earth orbits around the sun and how the sun, in turn, orbits around the center of a vast collection of stars called our galaxy. At the end of the lecture, a little old lady at the back of the room got up and said: "What you have told us is rubbish. The world is really a flat plate supported on the back of a giant tortoise." The scientist gave a superior smile before replying, "What is the tortoise standing on?" "You're very clever, young man, very clever." Said the old lady. " But it's turtles all the way down!"²

While the painting is a solid object and has readily definable characteristics, it presents the viewer with a question and places the ground of the question in an undefined location.

While making this painting, I had begun a series of sprayed cement works that caused me to reflect on the nature of the spraying process, both the material conditions of the process and its metaphorical aspects. The process of spraying involves a container of material, usually in a liquid or semi-liquid state. It is a unified state. The material is propelled through a valve, a point of control wherein the material undergoes a drop in pressure and is transformed into a particulate state. A small measure of indeterminacy enters into the system at this point as the particles are subject to minor atmospheric conditions. The material then reconstitutes itself into a relatively even surface, taking the form of the substrate that is receiving it. The way I see it, the valve of the spray device is analogous to the valve between the worlds of phenomenon and noumenon. Upon entering this world, a thing is constituted from a variety of particulars and is shaped by the field in which it is formed. The form of my sculptures and canvases are revealed by the process of concealment.

² Hawking, Stephen, *A Brief History of Time*, p. 84.

Another work that exists as a kind of model of the metaphysical relation between the natural and supernatural world is *Philosopher's Tarp (Universe in Seven Directions)*. (Figure 5)



Figure 5: *Philosopher's Tarp (Universe in Seven Directions)*, dyed canvas dropcloth, 12x65x50", 2011.

This piece was created through an ersatz “alchemical” process of dying a canvas drop-cloth with black dye in salted water in a large garbage can “pot”, heated to boiling with a large propane flame. After drying, it was then sprinkled with bleach to create “stars”, and starched to semi-rigid stiffness with rabbit skin glue. The canvas is a humble material that has been transformed in to a representation of something vast and cosmic

that also connects to the human scale of the body like an oversize article of clothing or a layer of shed skin.

Over the course of the last two and a half years, I have been developing a body of sculpture that utilizes a technique I have developed that involves spraying a mixture of Portland cement, sand, cellulose (or newsprint) and water with equipment that is typically used for applying a textured finish on drywall. The armature, or substructure, that I spray this over, has taken a variety of forms, but usually consists of an arrangement of construction debris, such as two-by-fours, fiberglass insulation and broken sheets of drywall. (Figure 6) The effect produced by this process is that these objects have been subjected to vast accumulations of silt, dirt, dust and ash. Another effect is the strange ambiguity about the “coating event”, that it may have happened over a long period of time, possibly at the bottom of the ocean, or, that it may have happened rather suddenly, as in the aftermath of a destructive event.

One of the inspirations for this work was the recognition of a similar type of coating material that is used for fireproofing in steel buildings. This material is typically covered up by walls and ceilings, but can often be found left exposed in secondary areas like stairwells, mechanical rooms and basements. The fibrous, gray material has the appearance of wet matted fur. (Figure 7) It is often speckled with white bits of perlite or vermiculite, a material that is added to the sprayed mixture in order to lighten the weight of the material, but has the appearance of tiny polka dots, a field of dirty stars, or a strange skin disease. If the building were a human body, this material represents the double repressed manifestation of fear and anxiety. It clings to the structure like a growth, but its appearance is so disgusting (disgustingly beautiful?) that it’s hidden beneath a smooth, clean surface of plaster.



Figure 6: *Poor Bottlerack/Bog Trees*, construction debris, fiberglass insulation, cement mixture, 94x58x26", 2011



Figure 7: *Receiver (All the World's Information Hardens)*, wood, portland cement mixture, 142x64x32", 2010

One other theme in my work is the conflation of architecture with the body. Similar to the correlation between biological and environmental systems, there is a relation between architectural systems, the operational systems of a building and the human body. For instance, insulation is like fat, the framework like bones, the digestive tract like plumbing and so on. Beyond these physical similarities, there are also correspondences between the language of architectural forms and that of human psychology. A doorway marks the transition between one space and another; a window frames the transition between interior and exterior. The whole of architectural space forms our human experience while retaining traces of our usage and tracking the patterns of daily life and our growth and transformation.

For the piece titled Lindworm, (Figure 8) I was thinking of a geometric column as an arm that fails to undergo the transformation that would allow the interior to evacuate its contents of domestic items such as old carpets and dishes. Instead, the interior causes the piece to rot, and it fails to function as column. It is set up on steel legs, in part so that it becomes a creature, a horse or a crystalline worm, and part as an object of study. It is a model of a failed process.



Figure 8: *Lindworm*, wood, drywall, steel, found objects, roofing cement, 58x114x26", 2010.

Another example of this idea exists in the work *Receiver Frame (Ghosts and Ghosts Go Down)*. (Figure 9) A doorway stands propped up at a slight angle by a third leg. Plaid fabric, here a symbol of bodily adornment, hangs in the doorway so that the bottom of it is about chest height. The top portion of the frame has been sprayed with a mixture of cement and cellulose, representing a physical embodiment of psychic projections on a structure. The fabric retains a record of this process so that where the fabric is left exposed, a ghost image of a head and shoulders is visible. It was inspired by an excerpt from the poet Rumi:

People are going back and forth across the doorsill

Where the two worlds touch

The door is round and open

Don't go back to sleep.³



Figure 9: *Receiver Frame (Ghost and Ghosts Go Down)*, wood, found fabric, cement mixture, 85x37x30", 2010.

³ Rumi, *Rag and Bone Shop of the Heart*, p. 236.

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