THOUGHTS WHILE BEING AN ARTIST

A Project

Presented to the faculty of the Department of Art

California State University, Sacramento

Submitted in partial satisfaction of
the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

Art Studio

by

Erik Mathew Castellanos

SPRING
2012
THOUGHTS WHILE BEING AN ARTIST

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Erik Mathew Castellanos

Approved by:

__________________________________
Sarah Flohr, M.F.A.

__________________________________
Date
Student:  Erik Mathew Castellanos

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_________________________________________, Graduate Coordinator
Andrew Connelly, M.F.A. Date

Department of Art
Abstract

of

THOUGHTS WHILE BEING AN ARTIST

by

Erik Mathew Castellanos

The purpose of writing the thesis is so I can one day look back on it to see if I still believe what I wrote. In that way it’s like a journal. When I came into this program I am sure I thought differently, but I did not have something like this to help confirm how different. I wanted the Thesis to be as honest as I could make it since its value to me depends on it. I know I will change again so next time I’d like to see how much.

__________________________, Committee Chair
Sarah Flohr, M.F.A.

__________________________
Date
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THOUGHTS WHILE BEING AN ARTIST

I’m aware that the discussion “what is art” is a very long and very old one. I don't intend to get into that. There is a whole lot of stuff out there claiming to be art, but I don't know what art is. What I mean is there is no list of qualifications; I don't believe in a specific set of characteristics to judge past, present, and future works. I believe a part of art's nature is in its inability to be pinned down. It challenges the status quo. As someone who creates art, my understanding of it has changed and my hope is that it will continue to change. I think finding an answer to what art is might be compared to finding the way to heaven. Sure, people will tell you that they know the “truth” and can show you the way. Like religion, there are a lot of people going down different paths, so how can we know which way is right? I’ll show you mine so far but I don’t expect you to follow.

Since I have difficulty stringing everything together in a typical format I have put together thoughts in a conversational manner. There are themes such as influences, relationships, and the market that are discussed in short bursts. I found this to be the most honest way to create a thesis. Coincidently, it is similar to how I create my paintings. So, my best shot at forming reasons for creating art will be with tangential logic.

MY RESPONSIBILITY TO ART

I treat my relationship to art similar to that of my wife and son. I understand that much time and attention needs to be paid in order to keep things healthy. I think my best shot at success is to ensure that my family supports what I do. The trick is supporting my family with what I do.
THIS IS PRETTY SIMPLE UNLESS YOU THINK ABOUT WHAT TO DO NEXT

Once I make something I don’t know what to do with it. The obvious answer is to show it but getting a show is tricky. I have not figured out how to do that yet. Then I have to decide what the goal of the show is. Is it to sale work or just to get it out there for people to see so they can react to it? I guess I’d like someone to react to it in a way that makes them want to buy it. But, if I think about the sale of it too much then will it affect what I make?

TO LOVE ME IS TO LOVE MY WORK

I read the book Just Kids by Patti Smith and found her understanding about the way to Robert Mapplethorpe's heart to be quite distressing. I was not aware that it was the same way to my heart until I read the passage. Smith recalls how acquaintances would seek her out to ask some tips of how to get close to Mapplethorpe. Her advice... “love his work.” Few people took the advice seriously and quickly found their way back out the door. Both Patti Smith and Sam Wagstaff knew this and they were the closest people in Mapplethorpe’s life. I am not one to send people running if they do not like my work but I am susceptible to those who like what I do.

MAKING ART IS LIKE CONSTANTLY BEING IN A NEW REALTIONSHP

Sometimes it seems like the only thing I'm sure of is that I don't know what I'm going to get. It’s strange how engaged I become with making. Plenty of time and money gets poured into it and I’m not really ever thinking about what it's giving me or what it can
give back to me. I’m simultaneously filled and emptied—of what and with what I don’t really know. It varies, sometimes I’m filled with doubt and sometimes doubt is the thing being emptied. I guess not knowing what to expect is part of the interest. Just like part of the interest in dating someone new is getting to know them, and part of the anxiety of dating someone new is that you don’t know them.

WHEN IT’S GOOD

When it’s good there are moments of clarity that allow me to track the current project back through the past work. I find the elements of the old that now give reason for the new. When these moments strike it is the cleanest clearest high. My enthusiasm turns childlike and I chase the feeling for as long as I can. The ideas seem to come quickly and succinctly. Work develops at a good pace and changes are made efficiently while backed with good reason and I can’t wait to show people what I’ve been doing.

WHEN IT’S NOT

Adversely, when it’s not good, self-doubt comes to visit and won't leave. At times it is my only companion. My ego is fragile so I don’t like to see people during this stage. In these dark times it is much like drowning. Compulsion and delusion are the only things driving me to keep working. I drudge through ideas even though nothing is exciting. There is a mixture of fear, boredom, and self-loathing brewing about at all times. Destruction becomes a part of my practice in this stage. Old work gets lined up so I can look at my failures face to face, then I pick a few to attack. I’ll sand away at them or take
a scraper to them to get off the old oil paint until there is a ghost of a painting left. I can again see the bones of the support and I try to lay a new vision over the ruins of the old. During the struggle to find my way, a life-line is cast and creativity is back online...repeat cycle.

DESTROYED INTENTIONS

I continually make and destroy with hope that something better will show itself. It’s not that I don't care for what I’m making it’s that I can't treat it as too precious to be changed. When I allow a piece immunity from this process it tends to disappoint.

IS MAKING ART AN ADDICTION?

I can’t see myself ever wanting to stop taking part in it even if it causes pain. Because I know this I feel crazy and a bit paralyzed when I consider my wife and son. I take a quick survey at most people in my life and this is not something they can understand. I have not surrounded myself with other artist friends. I did not accept that is what I am until I came to graduate school. I live with my wife and two year old son and socialize with people who have “normal” jobs. I’m hoping to become a functioning addict soon since they might think I need a support group to help me kick this penchant for painting.

I HAVE A HARD TIME TELLING STRANGERS I’M AN ARTIST

It feels funny to do that for a few reasons. One, I don’t know what everyone's idea of art is. The stuff I make is not going to go above the sofa ( I assume the majority of society
likes Art to go above the sofa). Two, it feels like I’m trying too hard to impress if I do that. If I was a garbage collector I probably would not say “Hi, nice to meet you I’m a garbage collector”. Three, (this one might change over time) it feels uncomfortable to be called an artist since I don't feel very accomplished. I have been creating for a very long time and will have two degrees in Art from reputable institutions but I have not put myself out there enough to earn the name.

CREATIVITY HAS TO GROW SOMEWHERE

I’ve come to believe creativity can lay dormant but it can bloom when limited. I think of it existing in a dark place like fungi; it spreads its mycelium to make a web of new connections to insure its survival. Often we do not see this at work. We could be someone who no longer engages in a creative process when we feel stuck. However if we remain vigilant we will once again see the sign of creativity at work and watch it produce once again.

WHAT SEPARATES US?

In present culture it might be argued that we are all artists. Most art currently coming out of the western world is theory based art that lives in symbiosis with Academia. This relationship is producing artists with vast amounts of theoretical knowledge who are largely self-taught in terms of technical knowledge. It’s not to say that great skill can’t be found, it’s that it is no longer part of the qualification. From my perspective it seems like it is not the skill but the idea that makes the artist today. I’d like to better understand what
this means for Art and artists in this day and age since the majority of us are not needed by society. I just wonder what will happen when society recognizes that.

IN COMPANY OF OTHERS

Even though at first I often feel skittish when I am outside of the studio, I can quickly find someone to talk to and get into a good conversation so I won't feel the pressure of producing take over for a while. There are at times nothing better for me than to sit with an artist friend and dig into an idea.

MEECH

I was taught by a good friend that sometimes the greatest work we can do as artists takes place when we are sitting in company of other artists and exchanging ideas. He believes the sharing of ideas is the art of it all and that we then proceed to justify and validate our ideas by turning them into something visual. He believes making the work serves a purpose that is good and makes work himself, but he would like to see us artists place more value on the moments we spend together and not just see them as fuel to be used back at the studio.

OUR EGO CAN BECOME DAMAGED

When I give shape to an idea by transforming it into visual form my ego becomes attached and it no longer is an “idea”, it becomes a “work”. This is the trouble with transforming ideas into work. When the idea is just in words it is more liquid than when
put into visual form. This means it may be more dynamic but can not suffer rejection as well. Words seem to have more of a defense since they can be bent and reformed more quickly. Whereas the work can be defended or built up with words but in the end it has to speak for itself.

I READ SOME NOTES BY GERHARD RICHTER
In one of his notes Richter talked about how it’s possible that we are in one of those periods in art when nothing great happens. That in time it may come to pass that what we produced for the last 50 years will be forgotten. I get strangely excited by that thought. I love that Richter has the self-confidence to say it as well as the conviction to believe it. His words helped give credence to my skepticism, and it was his collection of notes that inspired the format of this thesis.

RICHTER MIGHT BE CONSIDERED FATALISTIC
He does not deny that his views tend to come across that way. Richter’s reason for this is to remain at arms length to ideologies. He very much prefers to have doubt and skepticism rather than faith or belief in an ideological system. For it is in these systems where humanity has produced atrocity after atrocity. However, it’s not all hopeless. In fact, he thinks that he can have hope without faith. I don’t have the intellect of Richter, by no means can I comprehend and maintain all that he engages in. It is because of Richter’s ideas that I have accepted myself a little more.
WHY I LIKE RICHTER

Not only has Richter made up his own rules when it comes to explaining his work but he has made an impact on the art world with the sheer amount of different styles he has explored. I researched his output once to see how much he was making. It was bewildering. There was a time when he was making more than 300 pieces a year. His writing has taught me that the inability to trust is not a flaw but rather a response. Great minds have been wrong, absolutes have dissolved and truth has changed form since man's thoughts have been recorded. Remaining awake to humanity's shortcomings allows us to be surprised by another human's grace. That is more beautiful to me than having faith and being expectant.

WE CAN’T ALL FIT

There are a whole lot of artists trying to exist in a system that is a little too small. It is very likely that most of us go outside our discipline to put food on the table. Luckily for most of us there are other systems in place that depend on people to help their machine along. Currently I’m able to be in the Art system because I’m in school. That luxury will end soon and I’ll have to fight for a place at the art table.

IT’S TIME TO PLANT

As much as these last two years have helped me establish my art practice I am ready to move forward. This has been a gradual uncontrollable process of learning and absorption with a smattering of great discoveries. Balancing personal life with academic life along
with maintaining a healthy studio practice has its challenges. As a result I have encountered a few uncomfortable moments both at school and at home. However, I have been able to produce something new each semester. I have followed the work to its new form. My challenge now is to figure how to transplant my practice to its new environment successfully so I can still produce.

MY WORK

I have included all semesters of my work. I wanted to show them all because each semester under the guidance of the professors something new presented itself. The images are in chronological order to reveal the impact the program has had on my work over time.
Figure 1  *Untitled*, 2010, Acrylic on acrylic panel, 30 x 30 in

Figure 2  *Untitled*, 2010, Acrylic on acrylic panel, 30 x 30 in
Figure 3  *Grapefruit*, 2010, Oil on panel, 5 x 7 in

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