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BFA Fine Arts Department

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WHERE DO WE COME FROM?
WHAT ARE WE?
WHERE ARE WE GOING?

IN A CONVERSATION ABOUT PAUL GAUGUIN’S MASTERPIECE Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?: André Breton once commented, “I am struck by how valid the fabric of Gauguin’s painting still is today, perhaps because of its universality of the questions it raised.”

One is still struck by this thought today. The contemporary viewer notices the subordinate figures whose presence amplifies the background or environment according to the artist’s intention, notices how carefully they are placed to suggest “where” the body is, to reveal or externalize the state of Gauguin’s internal realms. In gradually looking from the right to the left of the painting we readily recognize the figure of an infant, a blossomed young adult, and an elder, representing the three stages of individual existence from birth to death. Breton’s insightful observation reminds us how this ultimate summation of philosophical questioning is in fact a direct result of Gauguin’s deep interest in primitive/folk art and the remarkable variety of locales and conditions of displacement he endured throughout his life: a boyhood in Peru, youth at sea, manhood with his wife and children as a banker, and finally his last phase as artist in Brittany and the Pacific.

Accelerated globalization in the last two decades, precipitated by the Internet proliferation and language disintegration, has emphatically situated us in a definite post-colonial era, once and for all. Excessive information provides hollow illusions, quick-fix solutions to merely pedestrian inquiries, instead of internal questions, which have been put forth among artists of all ages—say, from cave painters in the Paleolithic period to today’s artists, who employ newly invented mediums and engage endless references. Yet, one thing remains constant: “art is the only true and eternal organ and document of philosophy,” as Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling declares.

Gauguin’s traversing of continents was unlike that of earlier Western artists—Delacroix’s romantic view of Morocco, facilitated by 18th-century French new imperialism, was painted during his visit shortly after the conquest of Algeria in 1830. Gauguin had in fact abandoned his prosperous brokerage business, his family, and ultimately western civilization to devote himself to his art by living in a site-specific, rustic village in Brittany in 1889 as a temporary refuge; the fundamental question of “where” and “how” to express his inner state of mind seems now so prescient to the mass accessibility of place in our contemporary culture.

More than a century after the creation of his paintings, students of art, in response to the growing visual appetite of our culture, are compelled to ask the question of “where” and “how” to explicate the burden of global consuming culture in which they are most subject to and sensitive of, each bringing his or her own differences as well as similarities, in background, medium, and techniques. In Laura Murray’s installation, the intricate combination of artificial and natural objects focuses on the subject of growth versus decay, life versus death; Keijaun Thomas has expressively performed two separate video screens as part of his own “How to be a Man” verb list. From the stitching of Melissa Skiadas’s text-based work, sewn in used household objects such as sofas and lace crochet, which revisit the familiar in order to question the unfamiliar; to Casey Haberman’s printed vernacular images of past political figures and recent anonymous soldiers, or known personalities, which suggest the artist’s own ambivalence about the cause and effect of the U.S.’s imperial dominance; to Eric Fernandez’s more explicit portrayal of massive destruction, a vision of the urban environment in the state of siege—all are quite prophetic to the current political events in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and elsewhere in the Middle East. And while Nali Kwon struggles to co-inhabit combative figures in their surroundings with her anxiously expressionist painterliness, Naomi Selwyn conceives her figure as a singular, frontal image through which texture and deliberate distortion constitute their presence of sculptural form. The theme of repetition and dismemberment of figural imagery seems to be a shared narrative in Theodore Boyer’s sculpture and Gabriel Rizzotti’s painting. However, what repetition is to Boyer’s pure rhythm of stacked, singular cast boar’s heads, Rizzotti challenges by articulating subtle differences in various moments of the full figure’s slumping trudge, or figures in their Bacchanalian feast of cannibalism.

As to the subject of constructed interiors, Ryan Martin and Juhee Kim conjure up unequivocal examples in their maximal and playful visions, as far as the issues of scale and image, and the emphasis on the difference between made and found materials are concerned. The opposites is true in TK Tram’s monumental impulse towards constructive forms, Alex Bienstock’s minimal sound/text and spare selection
of materials, as well as Noa Leshem’s sublime emptiness, invoked by a field of volumetric light, projected in a highly controlled environment.

Far different from the subjects of human evolution, U.S. political history, violent depictions of the human figure, or imagined space of contemplation, is the recurring issue of nature vs. technology, which in terms of capitalist living condition it is, however ineffectively idealized, in the form of suburban space. On the one hand, M. Benjamin Herndon’s combination of original photogravure on zinc plates along with their identical printed images as “before” and “after” evokes at once a romantic aspiration toward nature in postmodernism’s predicament. On the other hand, beneath the interplay between delicate line drawings and photographs of figures, flowers, plants, interiors, and exteriors of comforting suburban settings in Alejandro Salas Strus’s intimate reality lies a compressed air of disquietude. And surely, in Michelle Boyle’s abstract painting, there is a subtle and not so subtle shift where anxiety turns into sensuality: longing for and denial of an image is simultaneously embraced. Distinct obsessions that are linked to the issue of art and technology can also be seen in the Ben Phelps/Jake Ashwell collaboration, as well as in Regina Jung-Min Hong’s installation. The former uses skewed and gridded stacked TV monitors flashing a mixture of static screens and what appears to be images captured by a surveillance camera or cuts of preexistent footage, combined with loud ambient sound, which creates a sensorial anarchy. The latter, on the contrary, displays absolute serenity, fully mediated in Hong’s full face projected on the floor at one end while on the other an array of violet light bulbs that contain half-filled water and live tropical fish project an orchestra of red and violet hues swimming in a hypnotic sphere. Finally, Lily Gist’s social commentary performance video shown with a large graphic chart rating citations of merit offers a brilliant endnote to this year’s 20/20 senior thesis.

This selection of 20 graduating senior students from the BFA Fine Art Department is an example par excellence of an internationally diverse group of students exploring the broadest breadth of disciplines that I have witnessed in recent years. Whatever the concerns we all share with our current world affairs—from global economics, political unrests, capitalist consumption, floods and famine, life to death, as well as the necessary refuge we all must take for our solace—each of these concerns is universally bound by still more fundamental questions, like those of Gauguin’s philosophical inquiry. Considering our particular global perspective of time and space, and the inevitable homogeneity of one assimilated language and identical ambition like the wavering ambition in the Tower of Babel fable, it’s indispensible for young artists to feel the urgent need to ask those fundamental questions again.

Phong Bui

1. Paul Gauguin, *Where Do We Come From, What Are We? Where Are We Going?* Painted 1897-1898, oil on canvas, 54.8 x 147.5”, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.
LEFT: (The Real) e$♢ate antistasis, virtual imaginary (detail), Mac laptop, laptop stand, printout flyer, light fixtures originating from downstairs studio, internet blog, dimensions variable, 2011

RIGHT: Parody of the Concrete (detail), readymade designer glass shelf, Venus project merchandise, Magic Mural wallpaper with Chase wall removal print, dimensions variable, 2011
Alejandro Salas Strus

Oshawa, Ontario, inkjet print, 44 x 66", 2012
LEFT: Stanley Enterprises, four-channel video installation, 16 zenith televisions, 10 x 12 x 8', 2012
RIGHT: Stanley Enterprises, four-channel video installation, 16 zenith televisions, 10 x 12 x 8', 2012
untitled, laser cut plywood, 24 x 18", 2012
untitled, laser cut plywood, 24 x 18", 2012
Eric Fernandez
untitled, toys, multimedia, dimensions variable, 2012
untitled, toys, multimedia, dimensions variable, 2012
LEFT: Man with Neck Wound, color pencil, collaged paper, oil and stitched fabric on canvas, 5 x 4', 2012

RIGHT: Woman with Neck Wound, color pencil, collaged paper, oil and stitched fabric on canvas, 5 x 4', 2012
LEFT: Hung / Man with Black Hair, color pencil, oil, stitched t-shirt, stitched canvas and wig on canvas, 10 x 5', 2012
RIGHT: The Cannibal, color pencil and oil on canvas, 8 x 10', 2012
LEFT: Relocation of the Memory, living gold fishes, light bulbs, video projection, 48 x 37”, 2011
RIGHT: Top: Ice Candle, ice, 3 x 3 x 2.25”, 2012
RIGHT: Bottom: Ash Candle, ash on mixed media, 3 x 3 x 2.25”, 2012
256 × 1 (detail), oil on canvas, 11 x 14", 2012
Acts of Violence, Intimacy and Liberty, multimedia installation, 8 x 6 x 8', 2012
Prostitute, DVD, video still, 3:25 minute loop, 2012
Life Lessons: How to Drink a Beer Like a Man, Instructional video, DVD, video still
Laura Murray
LEFT: Do You Have Any Regrets? (detail), plexiglass, paper, graphite, twigs, acrylic, eggshells and gold leaf, 24 x 26 x 4.5", 2011
RIGHT: Inheritance, bronze, plastic, dirt, living plants, 8 x 10 x 10", 2011
Fly Away Home, Sustainable ladybug habitat with ladybugs, plexiglass, medical tubing, pebbles, photographs, and mesh., 72" x 48" x 12", 2012
Ryan Patrick Martin

BOX Module, fabric, plastic, wood, tape, yarn, tv monitor, dimensions variable, 2012
TOP: Stich on Green Video Loop (detail view), tv monitor, plastic, dimensions variable, 2012

BOTTOM: BOX Module, fabric, plastic, wood, tape, yarn, tv monitor, dimensions variable, 2012
Lily Gist
DIRECT: Branding irons, steel, dimensions variable, 2011
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Branding irons, steel, dimensions variable, 2011
M. Benjamin Herndon

LEFT: Brown Studies No. 8, silkscreen and oxidization on steel, 25 x 22.5", 2011
MIDDLE: Brown Studies No. 4.1, silkscreen and oxidization on steel, 15 x 12.5", 2011
RIGHT: Brown Studies No. 5, silkscreen and oxidization on steel, 16 x 12", 2011
Untitled Dualities No. 3, silkscreen and oxidation on steel; silkscreen and graphite powder on gampi tissue; pins, 5.5 x 4.5 x 2.5", 2012
Melissa Skiadas

Whispering in the Dark 3, dyed polyurethane plastic, MDF, paint, 26 x 3 x 20", 2012
TOP: I Never Learned to Speak, yarn, embroidery thread, 67 x 1¼ x 100”, 2011

BOTTOM: Honesty Paradox, found teacup, enamel, 2.5 x 4 x 3.75”, 2012
Emptiness Breathes Between, found furniture, embroidery thread, 37.5 x 29.5 x 57.75", 2012
Michelle Boyle

LEFT: Green Explosion, oil on canvas, 48 x 36", 2012
RIGHT: Heat Wave, oil on canvas, 48 x 36", 2012
Rainstorm, oil on canvas, 48 x 36", 2012
Self Portrait No. 2, oil, collage on canvas, 58 x 46", 2011
My Mountain, oil on canvas, 64 x 58", 2012
(LEFT to RIGHT) Mouth Study, Self Portrait No. 1, The Woman, Shin, oil on canvas ea., (LEFT to RIGHT) 12 x 9", 36 x 24", 52 x 46", 48 x 42", 2011
Noa Leshem

*LEFT:* I and It (The bathroom), live-feed video installation, 104 x 98 x 191", 2011

*RIGHT:* I and It (The bathroom), live-feed video installation, 104 x 98 x 191", 2011
I and It (The bathroom), live-feed video installation, 104 x 98 x 191", 2011
Theodore Boyer

Exhibit A, digital C-print on steel, 40 x 28", 2012
Exhibit H, digital C-print on steel, 40 x 28", 2012
Study for Civilized Apex, 3D plaster and ink print, 5.5 x 5.5 x 3"., 2012
Emptiness Breathes Between,
Found Furniture, Embroidery Thread,
37.5" x 29.5" x 57.75", 2012
Untitled (The Entertainment Section), oil on canvas with neon, 105 x 86", 2012
Untitled (The Artificial Meat Section), oil on canvas with neon, 72 x 105", 2012
Jennifer TK Tram

Burumpumudum, wood, 120 x 144 x 108", 2011
Cornucopia, wood, steel, 140 x 72 x 156", 2011
CHAIR CHOICES
Shakhed Hadaya
Inflection Controls, ink on plastic, wood, tape, 84 x 78 x 92", 2012
Emptiness Breathes Between, Found Furniture, Embroidery Thread, 37.5" x 29.5" x 57.75", 2012

Sounds You Can't Make, plaster, graphite, wood, 48 x 80 x 40", 2011
Kayleigh Groves

Hudson River Experiment Series, acrylic and ink on rag paper, tip-ex on Mylar, dimensions variable, 2012
Twoism, glass, fern, earth, stones, charcoal, opal fragments and live moss, 9.5 x 4 x 2.5", 2012
LEFT: Terrarium Installation, repurposed glass, light bulbs, various plants, live moss, stone, rough gems, figurines, sand, water, dimensions variable, 2012

RIGHT: Devonian Experiment, ink, acrylic and dura-lar on mylar, 7’6” x 4’, 2012