

ERROR 404:

The Perils of Representational Painting

by

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INTRODUCTION

Humans gather information through the senses – each sensory organ narrowly evolved for a specific purpose. The perspectives we develop through our sensory examinations do not allow us to see or know everything – in fact, we are limited from knowing and experiencing most things. Everyone lives in a version of Plato’s Cave where we hear a sound and associate it with the moving shadows on the wall. With our limited perceptions, all we can know is the shadow and the sound, and we are left unknowingly unaware of what is unknown.

A painting is more than what we directly experience through our senses – it is more than colored pigment on canvas and, in the case of *News Feed (Social Media Circus)* (figure 1), more than the objective physical understanding of the costumes, figures, and drapery represented in the mimetic image. For every individual viewer, their associations with the figures and scenes represented in my paintings calls forth a perspective built on experiences – some solitary, some shared – that creates a web of collective interpretations surrounding the work.

The challenges (and perils) of communicating content to an audience through representational painting is found in navigating a landscape of varying (and occasionally, unpredictable) interpretations – each response shaped by the universal and idiosyncratic knowledge, beliefs, and experiences of the individuals viewing the work and their relation to the imagery found within.

My thesis research is framed by the inquiry of how one might exploit cognitive biases, logical fallacies, and the failings of intellectual rationality within the constraints of intuitive response through representational narrative painting. At times, these individualized biases can

work against an artist and act as adverse barriers between the intent of the work's creator and the interpretation of the viewer. This challenge has directed my research throughout my graduate school experience and forms the foundation of my approach to construct a cognitive labyrinth by exploiting these barriers to guide, as well as mislead, the viewer through visual clues found in paintings such as *News Feed (Social Media Circus)*.



Figure 1. *News Feed (Social Media Circus)*, oil and acrylic on canvas, 96 x 96 inches, 2019.

EVOLUTION OF GRADUATE WORK
&
NAVIGATING THE PERILS OF VISUAL COMMUNICATION THROUGH
EXPLOITING COGNITIVE BIAS

The Standard-bearer

The perils of visually communicating through static representational imagery is an obstacle familiar to my entire body of work involving figurative narratives with the muse of many painted narratives being politically charged news stories that inspired heated debates across the political and cultural spectrum. This has presented the challenge of bringing forth debated subjects through visual imagery without creating an impenetrable wall of emotions and intuition that limits the potential interpretations from the audience.

In *The Standard-bearer* (figure 2), I approached the challenge of presenting the viewer with opposing political view points surrounding a nationally reported event by staging characters in the hopes of obscuring the motives of the actors and casting them as both the hero and the villain through imagery recalling memorial sculptures and painting (a tactic I hoped would reveal to the viewer their own bias – optimistically expecting a self-guided re-evaluation of why they hold that bias).

The cognitive bias I explored as the potential frame to construct this visual narrative was the *bystander effect* (a phenomena in which an individual assumes someone else will do something in an emergency within a public environment, thus, leaving them inactive and feeling

free of responsibility). With this effect in mind, I allowed the ambiguous setting and narrative to bring forward each bias to the forefront by prodding an individual to respond through using the gaze of the central figure and how the viewer interprets their own role within the staged scenario through that response.



Figure 2. The Standard-bearer, oil and acrylic on canvas, 78 x 88 inches, 2018.

Blank Slate (magnolias)

In *Blank Slate (magnolias)* (figure 3), I approached this challenge by staging the environment and the characters within the play in a passive composition with the viewer safely out of the actors' gaze. My approach shifted towards an exploration in using color, objects, and symbolism through carefully selected items and positions of figures to elicit a reading through intuitive associations that come most easily to mind.

Blank Slate (magnolias), while inspired by a series of news publications conflating age-play therapy and age-play fetishism, became a narrative focused on the debates surrounding the concept of people as "blank slates" and how much of our behavior and character is pre-programmed through our biological make-up and how much is constructed through our culture and social upbringing – a debate that forms the foundation of many opinions surrounding identity.

We perceive a person's identity, even our own, as an incomplete image. Certain aspects of identity can not be put into words. As individuals, we process and interpret our thoughts, feelings, and experiences before expressing them forward through our decisions and actions – including our non-decisions and non-actions.

Experiences encompass more than what is perceived through the surface level of our being. The identity we each choose to project is a way of telling people who we are and how we are in the world, but it is only a facet of who and what we are as individuals. We define ourselves by a set of characteristics, not by everything that encompasses us. Each of us project personas, and we use these facets of our identity as a social tool for building relationships and navigating the social landscape.

What we view as someone's identity is not as simple as "this is me." A perceived identity goes through a system of experiences, interpretations, mediations, and negotiations through various agencies. The way someone views their own identity is a skewed interpretation of their own experiences – experiences are limited, and interpretations are flawed. As someone's projected identity is put forth and socialized, each mediation through outside agencies brings a new interpretation of that projected identity outside of their control. This is a continual unconscious exchange that hints at identity being a social negotiation (and a process that is paralleled by works of art that come out of an individual's inherent bias as well as when the works become socialized and interact within the public domain as objects of endless interpretations and consequences thereof).

One way I have chosen to demonstrate the idea of identity as a social negotiation is through the use of flesh and fabric as a metaphor for what we as individuals are, what we understand and claim ourselves to be, and what agents outside of our control may view us to be. For *Blank Slate (magnolias)*, I have structured flesh and fabric as a spectrum in which flesh represents the biological constraints in which our identities reside. Fabric is used as a stand-in for the social landscape and how it interprets and reflects the identity we present forward – sometimes as an interpretation with which we agree, sometimes with which we feel are at odds.

Exploring identity as a participatory social experience, the line between what is flesh and fabric is skewed through the placement of objects, the color of the costumes, the draping of fabrics, and the associations and interpretations found within. This ambiguity is evident throughout *Blank Slate (magnolias)* in areas such as the flesh toned dresses worn by the characters within the painting, the phallic ribbon draped across the masked figure, and the satin drapery staged to recall a placenta as the central platform in which the narrative takes place.

My interest in identity as a social negotiation encouraged me to further explore the interactions of individuals within the digital landscape of social media – a place where your projected identity is presented to a global audience and can be curated and changed simply by clicking a button, multiple times a day. This ease of changing one’s mask online combined with the unprecedented reach in which an individual can disperse information and interact with large populations giving instantaneous feedback to their (increasingly public) triumphs and follies revitalized my curiosity surrounding a breaking story of cows eating Skittles which would become the focus of my thesis work.



Figure 3. *Blank Slate (magnolias)*, oil on canvas, 45 x 60 inches, 2018.

THESIS WORK

News Feed (Social Media Circus) & News Feed (ERROR 404)

News Feed (Social Media Circus) uses props and costumes (or lack thereof) as tongue-in-cheek archetypal symbolism to present an allegory for social and biological debates about human nature. The imagery encourages, exploits, and pokes fun at cognitive biases while using play and performance as the stage – *pun intended* – to analyze critically the responsibility of the individual when publicly interacting within a large social platform such as on Facebook in the digital landscape – or, in the case of an artist, within a public exhibition space. By borrowing tactics present in sensationalism, the imagery found in *News Feed (Social Media Circus)* mirrors clickbait headlines and online yellow journalism inspired by reports of cows feasting on Skittles.

News Feed (Social Media Circus) and its companion painting *News Feed (ERROR 404)* (figure 4) was inspired by news publications, social media posts, government petitions, organized activism, and the surrounding controversy of a news story most notably published by CNN in early 2017. The breaking story, as stated in the publication, “starts out about Skittles but ends up being about cows.”¹ A Facebook post from a sheriff’s department in Wisconsin was the catalyst for this publication, which readers recall as a story about cows being fed candy such as Skittles. The sensational success of this story not only created movements to change government policy, organize animal rights demonstrations, and seek out signatures for countless petitions; the

¹ Doug Criss, “Thousands of Skittles end up on an icy road. But that’s not the surprising part,” CNN, January 19, 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/01/19/health/spilled-skittles-road-trnd/index.html>.

hype surrounding cows eating Skittles energized the cut-and-paste journalists across the digital landscape whom compete for the most clicks in a world ruled by algorithms (social media).

Online news organizations and information sources (trustworthy and professional – *or otherwise*) receive revenue through the digital advertising on the webpages in which we visit. According to the Pew Research Center, annual digital advertising revenue tripled from 2011 to 2017 with the majority of revenue coming from webpage visits through mobile devices.² In 2017, Pew reported 85% of U.S. adults get news through their mobile device³ and, in 2018, found that nearly two-thirds of Americans get news on social media⁴ (which, in this case, includes the news organizations themselves).

Most social media sites use the number of interactions a post has by the site’s users as the decider for which stories receive the broadest reach (and subsequently, the most advertising revenue) which is controlled by the algorithms these sites use to bring users seemingly individualized content. This combination creates a landscape of click-bait headlines, eye-catching imagery, and sensationalized content that is more about the targeting of an audience for the financial survival of news and information producing agencies and less about the quality of information shared and the consequences thereof.

Intentional or not, the use of sensational imagery and language within news headlines can influence how we read and process the information we are given due to cognitive biases such as

² “Digital News Fact Sheet,” Pew Research Center, June 6, 2018, https://www.journalism.org/fact-sheet/digital-news/?fbclid=IwAR1cR9muYIZUXXNcOjsr7AB6_hlcyn3-F1vrxrJYX5mVZTFVqNTt64gkftg.

³ Kristine Lu, “Growth in mobile news use driven by older adults,” Pew Research Center, June 12, 2017, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/06/12/growth-in-mobile-news-use-driven-by-older-adults/?fbclid=IwAR2YKMGOWh_IVm7DG1WZlJn8DVAHqfwXAHRI6vXqmKYJP1SssJD62Ujwll.

⁴ Katerina Eva Matsa and Elisa Shearer, “News Use Across Social Media Platforms 2018,” Pew Research Center, September 10, 2018, https://www.journalism.org/2018/09/10/news-use-across-social-media-platforms-2018/?fbclid=IwAR1LqUxHilMLf6jKJRIkus5Gsq2ALivfHsCTTjso2TaTlvS91ewIE_7xFPs.

anchoring (a bias referring to our inclination to allow the first thing we judge to influence all judgements that follow) and the *framing effect* (our tendency to allow ourselves to be unduly influenced by context and delivery – a bias commonly exploited in advertising). Using the audience as my “cognitive guinea pigs,” I approached *News Feed (Social Media Circus)* with the intention of testing these and other biases and their limitations within a constructed narrative through representational imagery in narrative painting.

News Feed (Social Media Circus) presents the viewer with an unapologetically artificial scene featuring a group of figures facing out towards the audience as characters on a stage (minus one comedic bull downstage presenting his backside as an entry point into the picture plane). The theatrical setting represents the “platform” that we as lingual social animals find necessary to communicate our ideas openly to discover our identities, explore difficult ideas, and learn about other perspectives and experiences that allows us to course correct as individuals within the groups we belong in order to function more harmoniously as a group as well as to come to better understandings of universal truths within a larger context. In the digital era, the social platform in which we share and improve our collective thoughts and opinions has become increasingly precarious as an unintended consequence of social media algorithms that create political polarization through limiting the content a user will be exposed to – an effect mirrored by the limited staged space in which the characters occupy in *News Feed (Social Media Circus)*.

Skin-clad female characters in rubber cow masks pose stage right with the bull eagerly eating Skittles from the floor – a costume referencing the biological nature and the intuitive cognitive responses that influence our rational thought and alludes to our tendency towards groupthink as social animals. The Skittles (a sweet treat lacking in substance and nutrition) are offered on a golden platter to the cattle by one of the trickster characters kneeling centerstage.

These colorful candies and trickster figures in bright costume function as the seductive allure that click-bait articles in our newsfeeds possess and double as symbolic representations of social pressures that are heightened on social media platforms which, in turn, influences our behavior in social interactions and how we communicate.

The saturated costumes, fabrics, and scenery accompanying the figures were selected as a continuation in the exploration of “flesh and fabric” as a concept where the visual slippage of skin and textiles present in the painting symbolize the negotiated space between our biological programming and socially constructed and shaped behaviors. The plastic aesthetic of the materials represents the artificial nature of the digital landscape and social media environments and highlights the debates on the importance of biology and social environments in human nature and behavior in a post-internet world.

Accompanying *News Feed (Social Media Circus)* is *News Feed (ERROR 404)* – an aesthetically flat painting with pixelated banding using the same color palette as *News Feed (Social Media Circus)* and mimics the distortion that happens to corrupted images stored on digital devices. “Error 404” references the error code a user receives when accessing a digital link where the page and/or content is no longer available. By referencing the deletion and corruption of information (visual or otherwise), this painting alludes to the phenomena that recalls the Memory Hole in George Orwell’s dystopian novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The vast majority of petitions, social media posts, articles, blogs, and small scale news publications that demonstrated the quick-to-arms and pitchfork justice inspired by the sensational headlines of cows feasting on Skittles have been deleted, blocked, and removed from the history of digital publishers altogether (including the original post by the sheriff’s department in Wisconsin).



Figure 4. *News Feed (ERROR 404)*, oil on canvas, 48 x 48 inches, 2019.



Figure 5. Peter Halley, *Permission*, fluorescent acrylic and Roll-a-Tex on canvas, 152 x 152 inches, 2018.



Figure 6. Robin F. Williams, *Boy Between Balloons*, oil on canvas, 48 x 48 inches, 2008.



Figure 7. Robin F. Williams, *Tired Prince*, oil on canvas, 60 x 44 inches, 2010.

RESOURCES, REFERENCES, AND INFLUENCES

A common criticism I receive on painting narratives that draw inspiration from news stories and human behavior as the catalysts is the seemingly detached nature of the content to my personal life – a criticism, while understood, I do not agree with as I do not find that detachment to be true. While hesitant to divulge information to my personal experiences that have created the skeptical bitter young woman I am, the stories I gravitate towards and my interest in the behavior of individuals when placed in different social situations is built out of a multitude of personal experiences that have granted me a close brush with the shadow within others, as well as the shadow within myself.

My interest in the psychology of human behavior has led me to the written works and public lectures of academics such as Steven Pinker, Jonathan Haidt, and Jordan B. Peterson among others. On his website, Steven Pinker introduces himself as an “experimental psychologist who conducts research in visual cognition, psycholinguistics, and social relations.” His written work *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* explores the “political, moral, and emotional colorings of the concept of human nature.” This book, paired with *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion* by moral and social psychologist Jonathan Haidt, has formed the foundation for my new direction in staging representational narratives that use how we process information and rationalize our intuitive responses to external stimuli as a blueprint to construct visual imagery in order to better communicate conceptual ideas within the work.

While I seek out content for my narratives in the pages of books, the bullet points of academic lectures, and within the social carnage found in the comments section of social media, the props and saturated colors present in *News Feed (Social Media Circus)* are influenced by painter Robin F. Williams and her early works depicting American mythologies (figures 6 & 7). Williams uses metallic objects, fluorescent colors, and high contrast within these paintings to create the sense of the painting emitting light – a characteristic I have worked to maximize in my recent paintings. This effect was also a challenge to create for *News Feed (ERROR 404)*, a painting in which I looked to the works of Peter Halley for reference (figure 5).

CONCLUSION

News Feed (Social Media Circus) and *News Feed (ERROR 404)* exhibited within the MFA Degree Candidates Exhibition at the Georgia Museum of Art doubles as a representation of a paradigm shift in my approach and understanding of the benefits and challenges of creating a narrative through representational imagery in painting. Through these paintings, I set out to create works that could manipulate the viewer and evoke an intuitive response that would reflect the mood I desired the viewer to experience rather than relying on specific information communicated through the chosen narrative to elicit a (much less predictable) reaction.

Often times, the viewer implicitly (and perhaps unbeknownst to themselves) want the creator to give them clues as to their position on a given subject. These clues are used as a guide as to how the viewer feels they should interpret the creation and the creator's intentions.

In the name of cognitive efficiency, we involuntarily use these base level intuitions to help govern how we feel about things without a truly rational explanation as to why. It is for these reasons that humans, given biological constraints, personal values, and individualized experiences, are predisposed to respond through intuition – and only then will the rational brain follow.

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