

ULTRA-NORMAL

by

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A Report Submitted to the Lamar Dodd School of Art
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Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

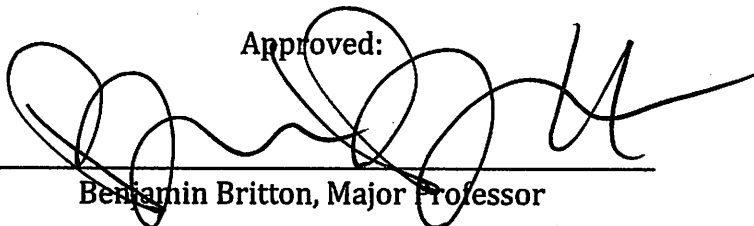
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Approved:



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Benjamin Britton, Major Professor

4/19/19

Date

For Kim.

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“You are looking at a species of flimsy little two-legged animal with extremely small heads whose name is Man.”¹

INTRODUCTION

The past three years has involved the dismantling and rebuilding of my art practice. I entered the graduate program working primarily in a graphic design methodology – using a big bag of tricks to put a nice finish on concepts that felt as though they were less than my own. Feeling this conceptual bankruptcy, I had to take a moment, admit this to myself, and start again. In starting a line of conceptual inquiry, I started with my own identification. White, male, rural-raised, married, liberal, atheist.

My personally progressive political views but rural Mid-West upbringing had always felt incompatible in my lifetime. Coincidentally, the world at large was reflecting the exact same sentiment. The presidential election of Donald Trump seemed to escalate vitriol and tribally divide the country into two distinct camps over every major issue concerning the leadership and future of the country. By extension all issues were stripped of nuance and turned into a rallying cry. To say the least, it was a difficult time to find commonality across the great divide.

Since initially my conceptual practice was to work autobiographically, I had a hard time trying to demonstrate nuance in an environment that felt binary. Simultaneously, I felt sympathy towards a population that felt overlooked and underrepresented as well as angry that existential human suffering was somehow being turned into political capital. However clunky and broad a task it seemed at the time, I wanted to start by finding some kind of universal connective tissue regardless of ideology. As stated previously, this was a reexamination of my art practice, which began by looking inward and progressed to my immediate surroundings, and finally to my community at large. What follows is an earnest accounting of my attempts at art making while following this line of inquiry.

¹ *The Twilight Zone*, Season 1 Episode 25, “People are Alike All Over,” Directed by Mitchell Leisen, Teleplay by Rod Serling, Aired March 25, 1960, on CBS.

PART I: Existential Avoidance

On Existentialism

The basis for my research started with trying to find a global framework of connectivity for the human experience. Are there universal, inescapable givens regardless of how (or even when) one was born?

In 1980 Irvin Yalom wrote *Existential Psychotherapy* and it outlines four “ultimate life concerns” that every human must grapple with: **death**, we are only on this planet for a finite amount of time; **isolation**, no matter how emotionally close we become with other human beings, a physical divide still remains; **freedom**, in the time we have on this planet, we are free to choose our own reality as well as how to navigate through our created reality; and **meaninglessness**, we choose how to ascribe meaning to the actions, objects, and thoughts contained within our daily lives.² Thus, even though the world is populated by unique individuals, according to Yalom, all must contend (consciously or not) with existential concerns surrounding death, isolation, freedom, and meaninglessness.

The clinical approach to treatment focuses on the individual experience. However, according to Yalom, any psychological problem can be traced back to one of the four concerns listed above; sometimes with overlap between multiple categories.

Meaning(lessness), Consumerism, and the Toy Loophole

The dilemma facing us is that two propositions, both true, seem unalterably opposed:

1. The human being seems to require meaning. To live without meaning, goals, values, or ideals seems to provoke ... considerable distress.... We apparently need absolutes - firm ideals to which we can aspire and guidelines by which to steer our lives.
2. Yet the existential concept of freedom...posits that the only true absolute is that there are no absolutes.... [E]verything that is could as well have been otherwise; that human beings constitute themselves, their world, and their situation within that world....

The problem, then, in most rudimentary form is, how does a being who needs meaning find meaning in a universe that has no meaning?³

The assumption here is that by finding meaning or a purpose for one's life, one will feel fulfilled, content, or happy. While Yalom goes on to discuss higher callings or activities an individual can throw themselves into, I would argue that if this base need for meaning is framed within the context of capitalism, we quickly (and perilously) arrive at consumerism. As our lives become subsumed by the digital world, physical distances between humans opens the door for objects to replace meaningful human interactions. In the

² Irvin D. Yalom, *Existential Psychotherapy* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1980), 8-9.

³ Yalom, 422-423.

opening lines of *The Consumer Society* Baudrillard states:

There is all around us today a kind of fantastic conspicuousness of consumption and abundance, constituted by the multiplication of objects, services and material goods, and this represents something of a fundamental mutation in the ecology of the human species. Strictly speaking, the humans of the age of affluence are surrounded not so much by other human beings, as they were in all previous ages, but by **objects**. [Emphasis by the author.] ... We live by object time: by this I mean we live at the pace of objects, live to the rhythm of their ceaseless succession. Today, it is we who watch them as they are born, grow to maturity and die, whereas in all previous civilizations it was timeless objects, instruments or monuments which outlived the generations of human beings.⁴

In the making *The Ultimate Collection* (Figure 1), I contemplated a time when I was most unself-consciously attached to material objects. As an adult there are justifications for the attachments we have to material goods, i.e. cars, houses, video games, clothing, etc. - one may need a car to get to work, but does anyone really need a luxury car? I was interested in a more direct connection between material object and desire with no qualifiers: toys.

The intensity with which I coveted these tiny, mostly plastic objects rivals no other time in my life. My mother would often leave my siblings and I to fend for ourselves in the toy aisle at our local department store, while she would continue with her shopping full well knowing that a battle of please-please-mommy-I-need-this-toy-to-live-or-I'll-die would ensue at the conclusion of the shopping trip. In its making, *Ultimate Collection* was simply an attempt to recreate this desire for an unattainable object. Ideally, the installation is hung above the normal viewing height - 7 feet or more above the ground - where the viewer is only able to look up and desire a closer look. The fact that the toy only “exists” on the surface denies the viewer the

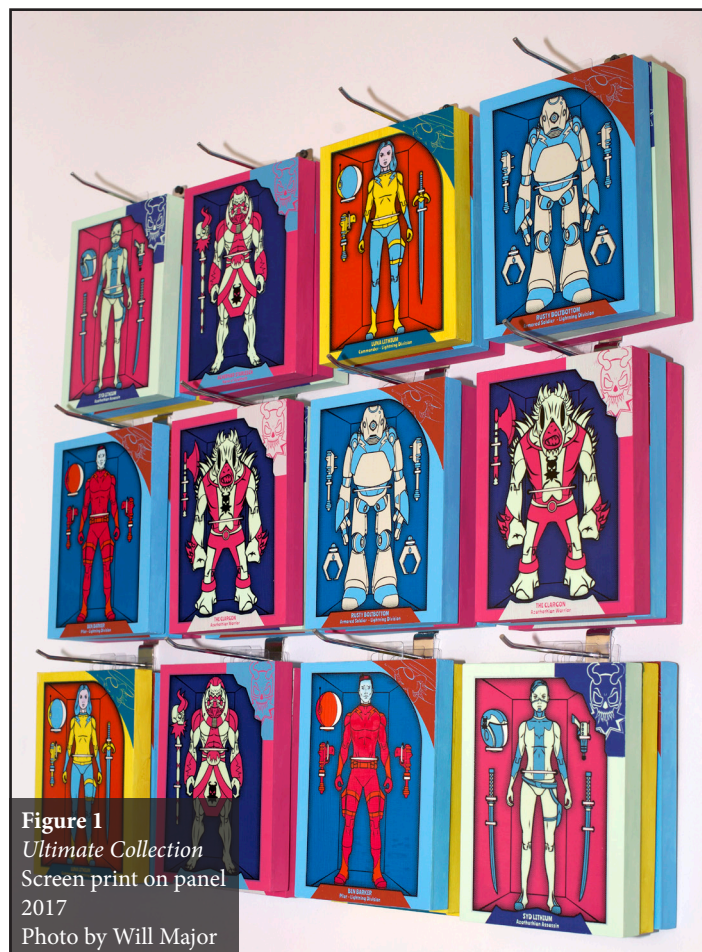


Figure 1
Ultimate Collection
Screen print on panel
2017
Photo by Will Major

⁴ Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths & Structures* (London: SAGE Publications, 1998), 25.

satisfaction of obtaining the object even if the viewer were to pull one of the panels off the hook (antagonizing the viewer would later become a recurring art-making strategy). After its completion, I started to pick apart the different facets of this particular art object as well as those of the toys I had as a child that made them desirable. Following this line of inquiry created a conceptual base for the aesthetic of future work.

In his famous essay about mechanical reproduction, Walter Benjamin writes that, “Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be....The presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity.”⁵ He goes on to argue that a work of art is in danger of losing its authority and aura by being mass produced - murder in the one-millionth degree. So how does an object, a toy that has been reproduced millions of times all over the world and has no “original” to speak of, contain aura? I argue that it is through unbridled mass-marketing to an unsuspecting audience.

A 1978 report by the Federal Trade Commission staff argued that the \$600 million spent annually by advertisers on children’s TV programs deceive children who are too unsophisticated to understand the messages or to judge the products. The...report...said that the ‘possibility of unfairness or deception in children’s advertising was sufficiently great to justify a rule-making procedure to explore the issue further.’... [W]hen the tremendous pressure brought by the [toy] industries that had the most to lose by such a ban was brought to bear on Congress and ultimately on the [FTC], it announced on September 30, 1981 that the FTC had dropped its attempt to set up rule-making procedures about whether advertising to children was unfair or deceptive.⁶

Through marketing, children are being told what they should want and how they should ask for it, which formed strong bonds to the toys that accompanied them/us through adolescence. And even though the relationship between toys and television was manufactured to increase corporate profit, the perception of the child was rooted in personal choice. This is an exception, then, to Benjamin’s argument where aura is lost due to the ubiquity of an object. Further, the television serves as a way to shield the viewer from the profit goals of corporations, leaving the child convinced s/he is in control of their wants/needs and that their relationship to the desired objects (toys) is a deeply personal one. If there still exists a strong association between personal choice/needs/desires/wants and toys from our youth, it is possible that adults engage with an art object in the form of a toy through similar responses. Using this superficial read and direct access to childhood to disarm the viewer, an opportunity to interject layers of content below an

⁵ Walter Benjamin, *Works of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (Lexington, KY: Prism Key Press, 2010), 13.

⁶ Brian Sutton-Smith, *Toys as Culture* (New York, NY: Gardner Press, 1986), 6-7.

unassuming surface is presented.

Social Constructs and Freedom

Another strong association between the person and the toy is nostalgia, which is grounded inherently in vulnerability. In one way, it can disarm and engage the viewer; however, it edits the complexity of past events. When accessing nostalgic memories, a form of reality creation occurs in order to suit one's needs. Further, Yalom frames this notion of reality creation within the context of existential freedom (i.e., one's freedom to choose).

Yalom separates existential freedom into responsibility and will. "Responsibility means authorship. To be aware of responsibility is to be aware of creating one's own self, destiny, life predicament, feelings and, if such be the case, one's own suffering."⁷ However, "Thought, in and of itself, has no external consequences - although it may be an indispensable overture to action: one may, for example, rehearse, or muster the resolve for action. Action [or will] extends one beyond oneself; it involves interaction with one's surrounding physical or interpersonal world."⁸ In other words, we create our own reality and are responsible for how we navigate through it. Based on this idea, it is interesting to think about our individual agency and *to what extent* we can impact our reality. We have a degree of freedom in reality creation but there will always be external forces acting upon the perceivable world around us. When working on *House, 1984*, I first wanted to consider my own reality, to what extent I felt in control of my own reality creation, as well as the external forces acting upon my control of reality.

Initially, one of the main motivations for making *House, 1984* (**Figure 2**), was to document a place that is incredibly important to my family - the proverbial "home you cannot return to." My grandfather and great-uncle built the house in 1947 (literally creating his own reality) and I wanted to utilize my own skill set as a designer to recreate both the house and the building experience (in 1/24th scale). The real structure sheltered three generations of my family. My grandfather farmed the surrounding 80 acres his entire life and my siblings and I helped my father work the land until it became financially impossible to support a growing family on a relatively small plot of land. (This last fact will be discussed in a later section.) The miniature version I constructed sits atop the soil obtained from the family farm. My parents still live in the referent house but it no longer looks as it did in 1984. I helped my father add on new sections of the house several times, removed the asbestos siding that was all too common in the 80s, and it has since

⁷ Yalom, 218.

⁸ Yalom, 287.



been painted and reroofed in different colors and materials. The toy/minature version of our house, however, acts as the perfect encasement of a number of years growing up under its roof. Susan Stewart states this idea more poetically:

Transcendence and the interiority of history and narrative are the dominant characteristics of the most consummate of miniatures - the dollhouse. A house within a house, the dollhouse not only presents the house's articulation of the tension between inner and outer sphere, of exteriority and interiority - it also represents the tension between two modes of interiority. Occupying a space within an enclosed space, the dollhouse's aptest analogy is the locket or the secret recesses of the heart: center within center, within within within. The dollhouse is a materialized secret; what we look for is the dollhouse within the dollhouse and its infinitely profound interiority.⁹

The miniature in this case represents a specific place that encases my earliest memory of the structure and that I had some increasing agency over as I grew older – from infancy and adolescence (no agency), to physically working on the structure and surrounding land (some agency), and finally, moving away (complete agency over my reality). As adults, all of my siblings and I have moved to larger urban centers, while my parents still reside in the Nebraska house. Sadly, our family is not unique in that younger generations leave the family farm to pursue economic opportunities elsewhere. Therefore, it was also im-

⁹ Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 61.

portant for me to document its potentially fleeting existence.

Knowing that the house may one day disappear prompted a step back and an examination the larger forces causing its eventual erasure, such as the country's (world's) growing pains with globalization. Like the eventual fate of my family's house, my interest in an individual's sense of agency over the changing landscape increased.

As of July 2017, the total population in rural counties was at 46.1 million – 14 percent of U.S. residents spread across 72 percent of the Nation's land area¹⁰ – down from 44 percent in 1930.¹¹ Rural American populations are disappearing. While many states have statutes or constitutional provisions against corporations owning farms to protect family-owned operations, agricultural supply and distribution corporations have made it impossible for families to subsist on small plots of land.¹² Thus, even family-owned farms are forced to acquire massive amounts of land and must rely heavily on automation to survive.

Farming is just one of the industries in rural America that has changed dramatically over the past half-century. It is more automated than ever, and a farm can be run with far fewer people than ever before. In 1900, some 40 percent of the population worked in agriculture, a century later, only 2 percent did. Similar dynamics have overtaken logging, mining, and other resource-extraction industries. In some ways, rural America, more than much of the rest of the country, is the victim of productivity gains. And in rural America, fewer other opportunities materialize to replace the jobs the machines take.¹³

Again, the reason for examining the larger picture is to consider the larger systems effecting the degree of freedom or agency one actually has control over. According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, a sort of food pyramid for human needs, at its base, are physiological needs: food, water, shelter, and safety. In the middle are psychological needs: belongingness – social or intimate relationships. Both categories fall under “deficiency needs” or I-don't-have-this-thing-so-I'll-go-get-it. At the top of the pyramid, and in the category of “growth needs,” is self-actualization. However, if needs are not met at the base of the pyramid,

¹⁰ Population & Migration,” *United States Department of Agriculture*, last modified June 7, 2018, accessed December 8, 2018,

<https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/rural-economy-population/population-migration.aspx>

¹¹ Alana Semuels, “The Graying of Rural America,” *The Atlantic*, last modified June 2, 2016, accessed December 8, 2018,

<https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2016/06/the-graying-of-rural-america/485159/>

¹² “Corporate Farming Laws – An Overview,” *The National Agricultural Law Center*, accessed December 8, 2018,

<http://nationalaglawcenter.org/overview/corporatefarminglaws/>

¹³ “Corporate Farming Laws – An Overview”

movement upward can be slowed or halted.¹⁴ So when 40% of the population residing in rural areas gets reduced to 14% out of base necessities (needing to find work to put food on the table), how much of a hand does someone really have in their own reality creation? More at the center of the following works discussed, how do the remaining groups of people cope with this sparse existence - one that was created due to larger power structures out of an individual's control? Based on Yalom's definition of freedom (primarily equivalent to one's agency), I would argue that freedom in this instance is quietly and subtly disappearing.

The closest municipality to our family farm is Shubert, Nebraska and happens to be a prime example of rural depopulation. In its heyday, it had several churches, a bowling alley, dance hall, library, grocery store, gas station, lumber yard, 2 restaurants and a population of around 400 in 1940. Today the population has dwindled to less than 150 people. Shubert now only has two churches and one bar. Stella, Nebraska, the next town adjacent suffers a similar fate: 1 church and 1 bar (and one small bank branch from the county seat). Dawson, Nebraska: 1 church, 1 bar. Verdon, Nebraska: 1 bar. Humboldt, Nebraska: 1 bar, 2 churches. Table Rock, Nebraska: 1 bar, 1 church. When I graduated high school in 1997, Shubert and Stella shared Southeast Consolidated High School, Dawson and Verdon had their own school system. Table Rock and Humboldt each had their own school as well. They have since all consolidated into a single school system.

The inside joke amongst the remaining denizens and those (including myself) that are a part of the population having migrated from rural to urban areas; if all else dries up, closes, moves away, or burns down, every town still has at least a bar and a church. This phenomenon is so embedded into the landscape of my upbringing that it tends to disappear into the background. However, the passing of time and distance has prompted a closer look at this near-ghost town gallows humor. I believe it is at the heart of the question posed above about how dwindling rural denizens cope with their limited existential freedom.

Farmers and what few other local businesses remain are able to sustain a modest economy based off of agriculture, thus meeting money and shelter needs. Base food and clothing needs are being met with shopping at whichever closest, larger municipality was lucky enough to procure a Mega Wal-Mart (which is fraught with its own set of complications).¹⁵ Moving up Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, I believe the social

¹⁴ Hazel Skelsey Guest, "Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs - The Sixth Level," *The Psychologist* 27, no. 12 (2014): 982-83.

¹⁵ Ed Pilkington, "What happened when Walmart left," *The Guardian*, last modified July 9, 2017, accessed December 8, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/jul/09/what-happened-when-walmart-left>



Figure 3
The Mustang Lounge
 Screen Print, Wood, Plexi
 2018-2019
 Photo by Will Major

belonging needs are thus facilitated through the bar and the church. Considering Yalom's definitions of freedom and meaninglessness, the bar and the church serve as the only resources left to cope with existential conflict. These were the ideas behind constructing the miniature small-town buildings; each of which serves to represent an existential need - with overlap happening between each one.

I thought about moving away
 But what would my mama say?
 I'm all that she has left and I'm with her every day.
 As soon as the sun goes down
 I find my way to the Mustang Lounge.
 And if you don't sit facing the window
 You could be in any town.¹⁶

The Mustang Lounge (**Figure 3**), is an amalgam of the small-town bars familiar to the landscape of my upbringing. I posit that these act as a receptacle for exercising existential freedom and meaningless-

¹⁶ Jason Isbell and the 400 Unit, "Cumberland Gap," recorded 2017, track 2 on *The Nashville Sound*, Southeastern Records, mp3.

ness as well as Maslow's middle tier of psychological needs. Similarly, *St. Anne's Church* (not yet actualized, **Figure X**), is an amalgam of the Catholic churches from the same area that function in much the same way - perhaps just different days of the week.

After finishing *House, 1984* and during the designing of *The Mustang Lounge* and *St. Anne's Church*, I felt that these works had a couple of conceptual flaws. First, there seemed to be a gap between the ideation in the creation of the structures and how they were actually read by the viewer. I felt that these works were in danger of being read as nostalgic, autobiographical dioramas. Second, I felt that the bar and the church may be perceived as being too reductive or worse, that I was casting aspersions on an entire population from my "elite bubble." This is the point that I decided to pivot from merely trying to depict a direct relationship between theory and art object, to creating a more open-ended question by implicating (and slightly antagonizing) the viewer as discussed in the following sections.

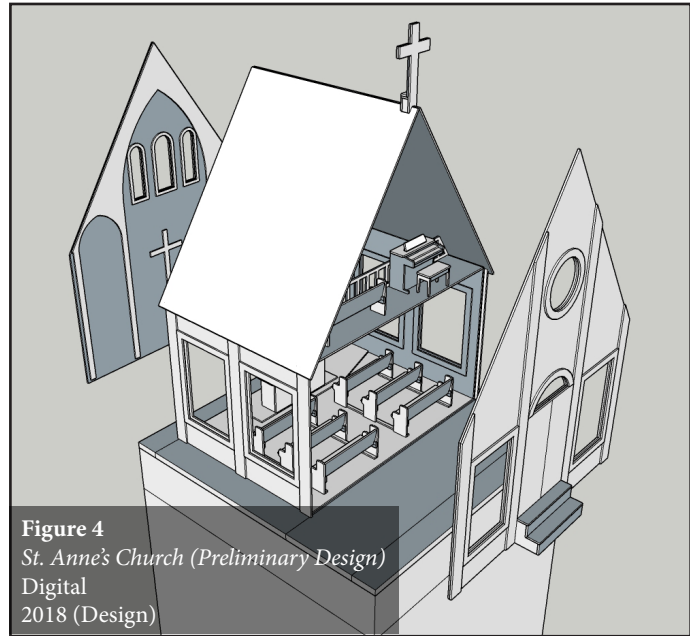


Figure 4
St. Anne's Church (Preliminary Design)
Digital
2018 (Design)

PART II: Viewpoint Confusion

In Part II, having established reasons for using a particular aesthetic as well as having discovered consequences of intersecting thoughts, I will express how the artmaking process happens either after or hand-in-hand with theoretical considerations. While existentialism is the bedrock for my work, in Part II I am more interested in some of the phenomenological by-products of intersecting theories. In particular, I am interested in the bodily responses or sensations when a viewer is confronted with perceptual shifts in space and time; thus, creating a more individualized answer to open-ended questions.

Warping Space-Time

The works discussed previously were an attempt to bring together ideas about the relationship I had with the landscape of my origin. In their making, those works also attempted to consider the relationship between the individual and the environment both emotionally and psychologically. However, depicting a place is not the same as eliciting understanding – an end with which I have since become less attached. As mentioned above, the pivot between the works previously discussed and the newer pieces is the attempt to implicate the viewer for different ends; making the viewer more conscious of their presence in space and time as well as a momentary hyperawareness - being fully aware of both your internal state of being and the external environment in the present moment.

Temporal Confusion and Death

The miniature offers a world clearly limited in space but frozen and thereby both particularized and generalized in time – particularized in that the miniature concentrates upon the single instance and not upon the abstract rule, but generalized in that that instance comes to transcend, to stand for, a spectrum of other instances. The miniature offers the closure of the tableau, a spatial closure which opens up the vocality of the signs it displays.¹⁷

As humans, we are restricted to existing for a finite amount of time and on a timeline that moves in only one direction. It is interesting to think of the miniature space simultaneously existing as both arrested in time as well as existing on a timeline infinitely in both directions. By extension, each object contained within the space has the same attributes.

In the making of *Basement, 1995* (Figure 5), I wanted to see if there was a way to destabilize the temporal nature of the miniaturized space. I would argue that for many, the idea of a basement is an area of the domestic space that (at full size) also resists time. The stereotypical basement is usually a receptacle for outdated furniture not yet destined for the landfill – at least until they are no longer able to perform

¹⁷ Stewart, 48.

their function. Décor too is either from a bygone era or a hodgepodge of familial kitsch. Electronics lag behind the rest of the domicile by 10 years or more. *Basement, 1995* is a scale reproduction of a corner of the basement from my childhood. Many hours were spent in the cool underground lair escaping the summer heat, waiting out tornado warnings, and playing Nintendo. In the making of *House, 1984*, I felt that the 1:24 scale encapsulated the house in its entirety but, due to this encapsulation, excluded the viewer to a certain degree. With *Basement, 1995* I made the diorama at 1:3 scale. This larger scale shift was markedly different in terms of psyche projection into the space. It served as an odd in-between scale of miniature and full-sized and allows the viewer more of an opportunity to enter the space.

In thinking about how the miniature exists in stasis and infinitely on a timeline, I wanted to see what would happen if one of the objects resisted this temporal quality. It may seem like a simple or obvious gesture, but making the television play actual VHS videos forces the setting back into a “full scale” timeline. This only happens, however, when the video is actually playing. Even when the television and VCR are stopped but powered on, the setting goes back to miniature time.

Additionally, the videos played on the television are home video recordings collected from anonymous thrift store donors and are used to create a voyeuristic component to the experience. (More about the voyeuristic act of looking will be covered in the next section.) This was employed to draw the viewer one more layer into the miniature setting whereby the viewer becomes more engrossed in trying to decipher the contents of the video. When the video stops, the viewer must back out of two levels of immersion: from the video to the miniature setting and from the miniature setting back into their own



Figure 5
Basement, 1995
 Screen Print, Wood, Plexi, Monitor
 2018
 Photo by Will Major



Figure 6
Hell Is Other People
 Screen Print, Wood, Peephole, LEDs, Mixed Media
 2018-2019
 Photo by Will Major

body and full-scale surroundings. Thus, this instantaneous scale shift in both space and chronological time happens when the video ends and creates an avenue for the viewer to become hyper-aware of their own existence as a temporal being in space.

This phenomenon and the awareness of one's own timeline is directly connected to Yalom's discussions on dread of or waiting on death. While this is not a foregrounded aspect of the work, I think necessary to still highlight the experiential and existential connectedness beneath the objects being discussed.

Voyeurism and Isolation

Individuals are often isolated from others and from parts of themselves, but underlying these splits is an even more basic isolation that belongs to existence - an isolation that persists despite the most gratifying engagement with other individuals and despite consummate self-knowledge and integration. Existential isolation refers to an unbridgeable gulf between oneself and any other being. It refers, too, to an isolation even more fundamental - a separation between the individual and the world.¹⁸

In thinking about the relationship between the individual and the environment, it is interesting to consider a place where the tension of humans living in physical proximity to one another is on display. In the suburbs, each home is situated on a plot of land that creates a small but defined barrier from the next home. Often Home Owners' Associations (HOAs) are enacted to restrict paint color, grass height, parking, exterior decorations, etc. to guarantee a certain degree of homogeneity. Just prior to making *Hell Is Other People* (Figure 6) I was visiting a relative that lives in west Omaha, a sprawl of suburbia as far as the eye can see. In conjunction with the above Yalom quote, I started thinking about what Jean-Paul Sartre meant

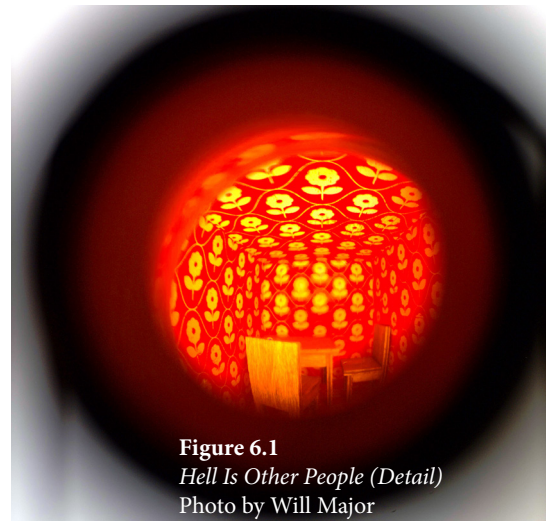


Figure 6.1
Hell Is Other People (Detail)
 Photo by Will Major

¹⁸ Yalom, 355.

when he wrote “Hell is other people” in his play, *Huis Clos (No Exit)*: “[I]f relations with someone else are twisted, vitiated, then that other person can only be hell. Why? Because ... when we think about ourselves, when we try to know ourselves ... we use the knowledge of us which other people already have. We judge ourselves with the means other people have and have given us for judging ourselves.”¹⁹ In other words, we judge ourselves based on others’ judgements and are only free to be ourselves unobserved, while behind closed doors. This thought highlights the tension in suburban neighborhoods between exterior appearance and the hidden interior. By extension this desire to know the secretive interior highlights a desire toward voyeurism.

Rosalind Krauss connects a voyeuristic character in Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness* to the voyeur (a term explicitly used in the artist’s installation instructions) in Duchamp’s *Etant donné* as well as how the act of voyeuristic looking transforms the body into object. In Sartre’s play, the character is hunched over and peering through a keyhole at a scene beyond the door. This voyeuristic act is interrupted by the footsteps and, more importantly, the gaze of someone else entering the room from behind.

To be discovered at the keyhole is, thus, to be discovered as a body; it is to thicken the situation given to consciousness to include the hither space of the door, and to make the viewing body an object for consciousness. As to what kind of object, Sartre defines this only in relation to the Other— the consciousness of the one who discovers him, and in whose look he ceases totally to master his world. As for himself, this thickened, carnal object produces as the content of his consciousness the carnation of shame.²⁰

Through the act of looking (and being caught in the act) the voyeur is reduced not only to object, but to the embodiment or idea of pure shame. It is precisely this transformation and hyperawareness of the reduced self that I was attempting to foreground in *Hell Is Other People*. In looking through the peephole, the viewer becomes detached from themselves. Unable to enter the interior space yet not existing in their own bodies either, the viewer exists in a sort of limbo – simply existing within the 1 ½” tube of the peephole. The viewer becomes hyperaware of themselves through strategies designed to distort the perception of space and time – separating consciousness and perception from the body – much like the viewing experience of *Basement*, 1995.

¹⁹ Brandon Ambrosino, “Hell is other people...misquoting philosophers,” *Vox*, last modified November 17, 2014, accessed December 8, 2018, <https://www.vox.com/2014/11/17/7229547/philosophy-quotes-misunderstood-wittgenstein-sartre-des-cartes>

²⁰ Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Boston: MIT Press, 1996), 112.

PART III: Thesis Work

Projection and Implication

Hell Is Other People (described above and included in the thesis show) was designed to make the viewer repeatedly alternate between existing in a bodiless consciousness while looking through a small peep hole and existing in their body to make the viewer hyperaware of their connection between consciousness and bodily presence. *Basement*, 1995 was created to subvert the temporal nature of the miniature's encapsulated interiority thus bringing an awareness to one's own physical timeline. The revised/full version of *The Mustang Lounge* incorporates strategies of confusing bodily reactions to and perceptions of space and time utilized in both *Hell* and *Basement*.

The Mustang Lounge installation incorporates a projection taken from the interior of the bar. The bar was placed at a vantage point that forced a perspective in which the miniature "interacted" with the real world. The video, shot in Bishop, Georgia references the original intent of the project by incorporating the Bishop Methodist Church across the street (i.e., in small-town American, existential needs are met with a bar and a church). The projection is a 5-minute video shot on a Saturday night and taken throughout the course of 8 hours – specifically 4PM to midnight – typical business hours. In the final installation,



Figure 7
The Mustang Lounge (Installation)
 Screen Print, Wood, Plexi, Video Projection
 2018-2019
 Photo by Will Major

the video is projected on a wall across from the miniature of the bar.²¹ (See **Figure 7**.) Speakers are also placed in the space between the miniature and the projection where a soundtrack to the projection is being played in “real” time. It incorporates ambient bar noises, passing cars, and a section of Isbell’s “Cumberland Gap” for which the installation gets its namesake.

Theoretically, the space between the miniature and the projection creates a paradoxical zone where, in one direction, the viewer can project into the miniature (time is arrested and generalized) but must also contend with the miniature space projected at life-size and interacts with the real world (time is accelerated). The viewer physically occupies the middle space in which audio plays in “real” time. The goal of which is to not allow the viewer a sense of stability or the opportunity to exist in any of the three parts for any length of time. As with previous works discussed, the hope is that this flitting between different spatial and temporal zones will disorient the individual and their awareness of their own bodily relationship with space and time.

²¹ YouTube link to video: <https://youtu.be/i8O67uaLbHE>

PART IV: CONCLUSION

Nostalgia and Memory Versus Science Fiction

The largest area of growth that has promoted much of the current research is an emphasis on the conceptual basis of what I was creating. Conceptually, I am most optimistic and excited about how considerations around the phenomenological act of looking and momentary feelings of embodiment have become as important as thematic inquiries. This avails the possibility of pivoting slightly from working autobiographically. I have discovered the need to include a thread back to personal authenticity, but I continue to find myself suspicious of nostalgic themes for fear of the work being perceived as trite or maudlin.

Coming into this program, I had well honed illustration and design skill sets as well as attention to details and precise craft. In my work, I was able to combine these skills in what I think of as “sets” rather than a miniature or diorama, per se, as I am trying to distance myself from the pejorative connotation of the shoddy science fair project or outdated roadside attraction display. However, the inclusion of time-based media into *The Mustang Lounge* has afforded me the ability to elevate the skills I possessed coming into the program into a myriad of formal considerations as well as avenues of exploration for content.

Further, in pairing the piece with aspects of digital media, a line of inquiry has opened up in the exploration of GIF animation or film as the final form and whether the miniature should be included. Previously, my illustration practice is/was an extension of my desire to escape the “too-real” surroundings of my rural past. It was the immersion into science fiction that provided that escape. *Star Trek*, *Dune*, *Blade Runner*, *Terminator*, *Alien*, (to name only a tiny few) have all loomed huge in my periphery. Now, rather than consuming them to escape, a new practice has developed in dissecting the deeper rooted thematic elements (e.g., *Dune* – colonialism, *Blade Runner* – what it means to be human, *Terminator* – runaway AI, *Alien* – colonialism, man’s place as apex in the universe).

By far the biggest media and science fiction influence, that holds the best conceptual weight, is *The Twilight Zone*. It is this brand of science fiction that foregrounds contemporary socio-political issues with the unreal or surreal and seems uniquely poised to bridge my autobiographical way of working with an attention focused even more outward. I am unsure as to what form this will take in my work; however, I will close with my initial foray into combining the “townie” trope with the science fiction trope. I give you *Ultra-Normal Tales from Nowhere* (**Figure 8**):

ULTRA NORMAL
TALES FROM NOWHERE

SQUARE ROOT BEER

MATT BARKER
JUSTIN BARKER

INTRODUCING...
Sgt. Foresight's Lil' Survival Bucket!

GET ONE BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE!

OUR SNACKS ARE A BLAST!™

WHISTLE/WATER-PURIFIER IN EVERY BUCKET!
COLLECT ALL 4 COLORS/FLAVORS!

AT THE DOORWAY BETWEEN HEAVEN AND HELL, SPACE AND TIME, AND OTHER DIMENSIONS THE LIKES OF WHICH MAN HAS YET TO SEE, THERE IS A SMALL TOWN THAT GREET'S ALL OF THE STRANGENESS IN THEIR LIVES WITH BORED ACCEPTANCE. THIS IS JUST ONE OF THE...

ULTRA NORMAL
TALES FROM NOWHERE

AT THE PIZZ-AGO 1-STOP ...

DO YOU EVER FEEL LIKE YOUR LIFE ISN'T YOUR OWN?
LIKE YOU'RE SWIMMING IN A STREAM, BUT THAT STREAM ENDS AT A WATERFALL?

UH... PACK OF BRONCOS PLEASE?

WRITTEN BY MATT BARKER
ART BY JUSTIN BARKER

FOR A WHILE, IT'S KIND OF FUN, BUT AS THE CURRENT PICKS UP YOU REALIZE YOU DON'T WANT TO GO IN THAT DIRECTION.

BY THEN IT'S TOO LATE, THOUGH.

IS SOMETHING BURNING?

THE PULL OF THE WATER IS TOO STRONG, SO, INSTEAD YOU JUST HOLD YOUR BREATH AND HOPE YOU COME OUT THE OTHER END OKAY.

CAN I JUST GET THE NUMBER 2 PLEASE? NO SOUR CREAM.

THANKS FOR LETTING ME VENT. ENJOY YOUR TACOS

WAIT, SO IS SHE ONE OF OURS?

NOPE. THE LAST GUY WHO TRIED LIVING AS HER COULDN'T HANDLE IT. VAPORIZED HIMSELF AFTER A WEEK.

YOU SAID NO SOUR CREAM, RIGHT?

GET READY TO WOW YOUR FRIENDS AND FAMILY WITH THE ...

ThodaCo. "Two-Way" Interdimensional Transmitter!

LEARN ABOUT THE DIFFERENT CULTURES OF THE FALLEN ONES AS TOLD TO YOU IN CRYSTAL CLARITY FROM NINE CIRCLES OF THE UNDERWORLD. SPEAK WITH DEMONS, SPIRITS, AND OTHER INEXPLICABLE BEINGS IN THEIR OWN NATIVE (FORKED) TONGUES FROM THE COMFORT OF YOUR OWN BEDROOM WITHOUT EVEN HAVING TO SACRIFICE MUCH OF YOUR SOUL!

MONEY-BACK GUARANTEE**

Sign* this contract in your blood and mail it with 2 Silver pieces to:
667 Salem's Lane
Newark, NJ 07112

Name _____
Address _____
City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Only 10 payments of \$29⁹⁵

Do YOU know which of your FRIENDS is under the control of a SLERBAX? Everyday, more and more youths are succumbing to these alien parasites that are slowly taking over this world. If you feel yourself coming under their telepathic influence, remember to

S.P.I.T.:

SHOUT Shout for an Adult!

PRAY Pray to whatever god you believe in!

IGNORE Ignore foreign thoughts!

TAKE DRASTIC MEASURES Because sometimes death is preferable to servitude.

Paid for by the Department of Neural Liberation

Figure 8
Ultra-Normal Tales From Nowhere (Issue 2)
(Written with Matthew Barker)
Screen Print
2018

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