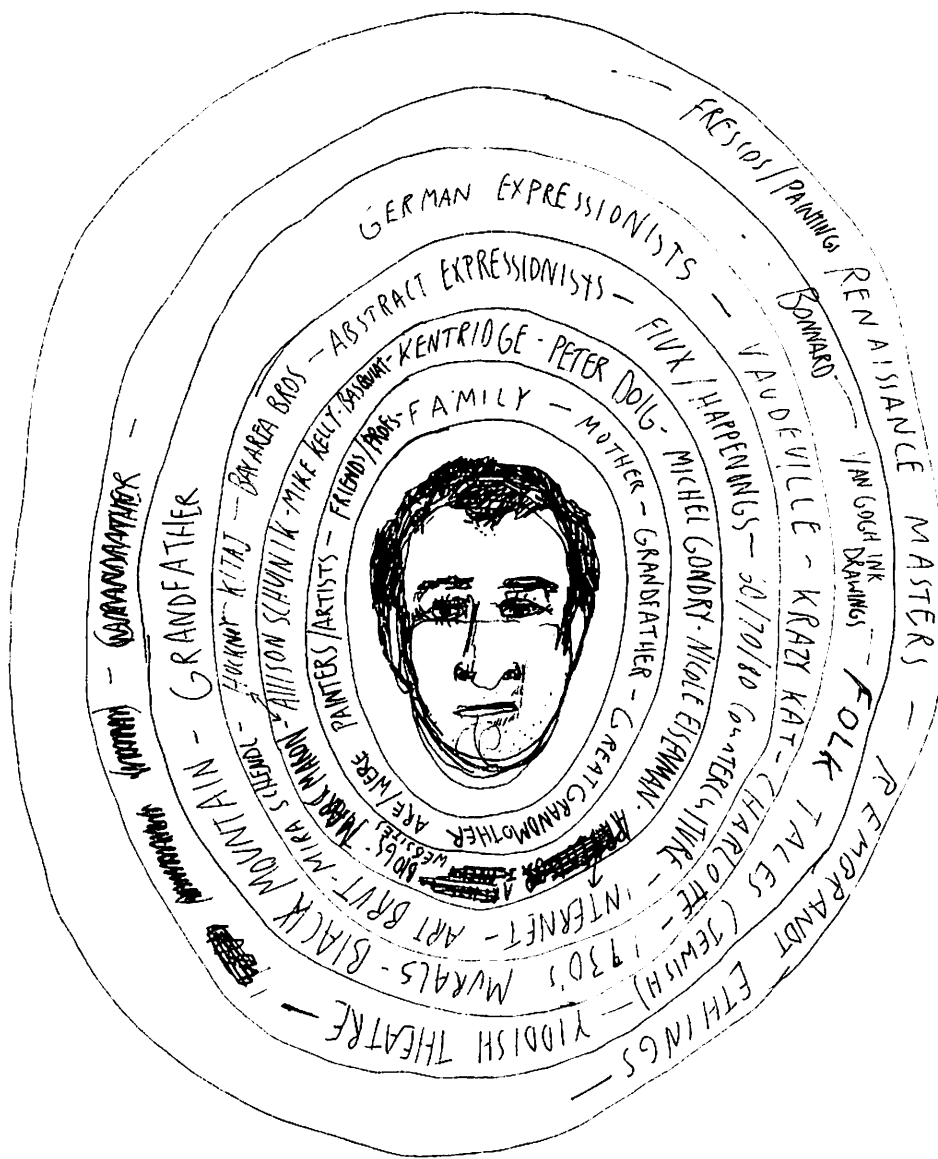


OYVEY

Three Years of Graduate Research



By Michael Siporin Levine

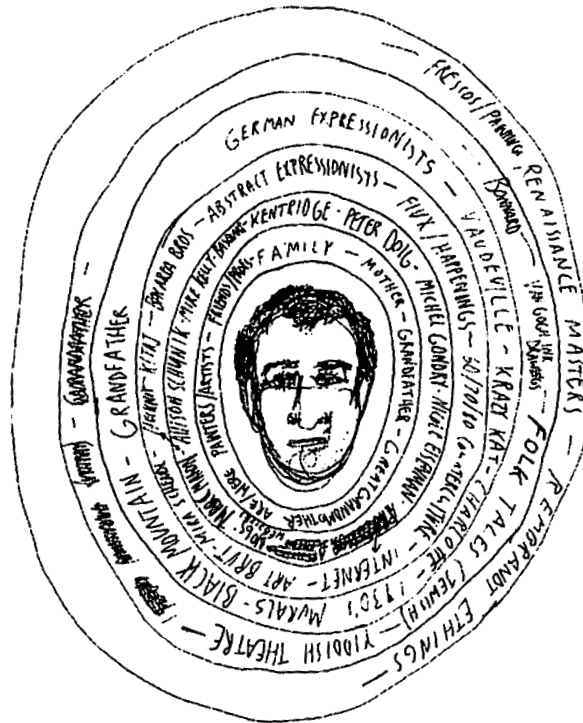
B.F.A., University of Connecticut, 2011

**A Report Submitted to the Lamar Dodd School of Art at The University of Georgia
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts**

Spring 2014

WORK*CHILL*PLAY
OYVEY

Three Years of Graduate Research



Approved:

Melissa Harshman

Melissa Harshman, Major Professor

1 May 2014

Date

Thank You



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While in graduate school, I have expanded upon my foundational understanding of visual art through experimentation, critique, travel, and teaching. Constructive dialogue and everyday interaction with professors, peers, and visiting artists have encouraged my development as an artist. I have maintained core beliefs in my work allowing myself to delve deeper within existing interests, while being open to new ways of thinking and creating. Through a large body of graduate work exploring an array of subject matter and process, I have examined and established a continuously developing studio practice.

I believe that a main focus of my graduate research over the last three years has been an exploration of using personal experience to influence imagery. Over the course of this essay, I will analyze and use examples of my prints, drawings, videos, and installations to show how my process and ideas have evolved regarding my interest in working from personal experience and autobiography.

Part 1: Self-Imagery

By using myself as a model I am able to analyze how I relate to my environment. During my first year of graduate school I worked primarily with stone lithography, using self-imagery as a starting point, knowing that the imagery and idea has potential to change through the process. I set up a large folding mirror in my studio as a way for me to draw myself from observation. Working from the mirror allowed me to draw my hands in strange positions, examine different facial expressions, and understand how I physically relate to my surroundings. My intention was not to make a traditional self-portrait, but to use aspects of myself (my eyes, nose, hands) to spark a narrative or evolving idea. I would use my knowledge of form and structure through observational drawing, distorting features by shifting the scale or adjusting the angle and position. This is evident in one of my first lithographs in graduate school titled *"Head"*. Making a nose larger, or drawing an eye in three-quarters view, appeals to me because it is based on truth while simultaneously allowing me to invent my own reality.



Head,
Lithograph
2011

I believe that the lithographs I made in my first year, especially my interpretation of the figure, echo the work of my art heroes who I was looking at and reading about at that time. The summer before graduate school, I attended "German Expressionism: The Graphic Impulse" exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art with my mentor and undergraduate professor Gus Mazzocca—a resonating and profound experience. Personal highlights of this exhibition include the prints of Kathe Kollwitz, Max Beckman, Emile Nolde, George Grosz and Otto Dix. As I look at the series of lithographs I produced my first year, I also

feel a deep connection with the earlier, more representational work of Willem DeKooning , where he clearly worked from self-portraiture and observation shown through his abstraction of the human figure through process. His series of iconic, singular seated men and women from the 1930's and 40's inspired some of the subject matter for the prints I made my first year.



Guy and Gal. Lithograph on Japanese paper. 40" x 32", 2012.



Two Men, Two Sorority Girls. Lithograph, woodcut, oil stick, collage. 40" x 38". 2012

Part 2: Object

In addition to my use of self-imagery as a means to present personal content within the work, I find that I can use objects from life as a way to stand-in and represent a personal experience. In my second year of graduate school, while taking a video installation course, I did a series of work titled "Boy with Toy" which was inspired by a cowboy action figure I found at the local flea market. The title of the series pays homage to an ink drawing done by my grandfather, Mitchell Siporin, a Works Progress Administration muralist and painter. Using the cowboy action figure as inspiration, was one of the first series of work in which I explored ideas of memory, childhood, and play through exploration of different mediums. In addition to a series of drawings and lithographs, I created an installation in the project space of the Printmaking and Book Arts Department. Inspired by performance pieces of the 1960's happenings, I

hung drawings from the ceiling, projected video onto screen-printed fabric, and attempted a performance where I taped iPhones to my face then danced to an Eric B. and Rakim song. This installation was formative, as it opened my studio practice to new ways of experimentation.



Top left: Poster for performance and installation of *Boy with Toy*

Top Right: documentation of performance of *Boy with Toy*

Bottom Left: *Boy with Toy*, Lithograph, 24"x 36". 2012.

I draw from objects that are personal to me, yet recognizable to the viewer allowing for an open interpretation of a narrative. The objects become symbols for stories and memories. In my video installation titled "In Between" I use a striped green and white plastic bag from my trip to Cuba. I found this bag while in Havana and decided to save it because of its formal qualities—I had never seen a bag like this before and was attracted to the thin plastic, striping, and its interaction with light. While working on this installation through drawing and video, I began to associate feelings with the plastic bag, anthropomorphizing the object to a character and stand-in for myself. The strange undulating and floating movement of the bag across the screen is reminiscent of my experience as a confused tourist wandering through a new country. I create work from my everyday life, with the hope of inserting metaphor and meaning into mundane situations.



Top left: Video still from *Between the Pines*, projected in installation *In Between*. 2013.

Bottom left: Documentation of installation *In Between*. 2013.

Bottom right: *In Between*, collagraph, screenprint, oilstick, collage, 2013



Part 3: Process

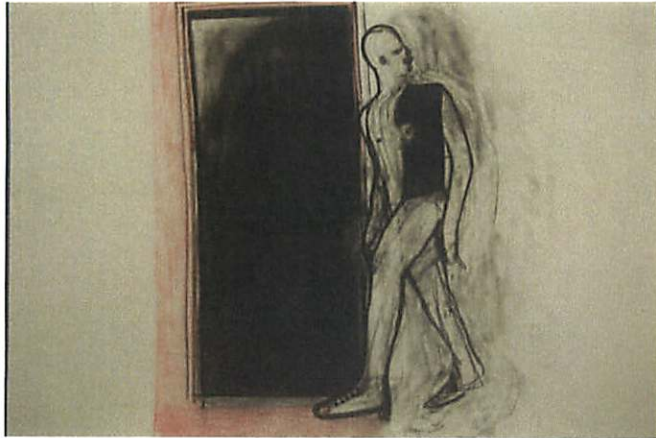
While I use autobiography and personal experience as a foundation, I rely on process to help inform my drawing, imagination, and invention of narrative. This is one reason why I embrace traditional printmaking techniques, as it encourages chance to play a role in my process. William Kentridge makes this observation about the printmaking process:

"There's a difference between simply making a drawing and having to put it through another process; having to ink it up, send it through a press, and at the other side find a version that's very different—as if it's done by a different hand...There's something in the drawing's going through the process of invisibility under the press and coming out, in your peeling the sheet of paper off the etching plate or lithographic stone....which is a difference. It is a moment of separation between making and seeing the image, which is important."¹

I find that being able to work with a technical process is challenging and aids in the development of my ideas and aesthetic. In my second year of graduate school, I extended my interest in working against a technical process through the medium of video and animation. Dedicated to drawing and inspired by the animations of Kentridge, early David Lynch films, and Allison Schulnik's animated clay

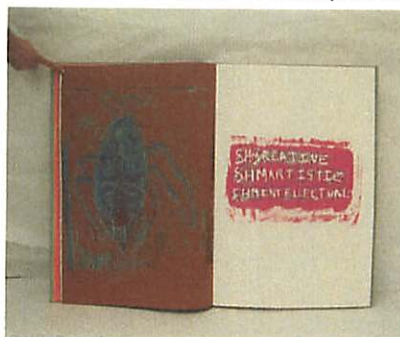
¹ Judith Hecker. "William Kentridge: Trace. Prints from the Museum of Modern Art" (The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2010), pg 66.

sculptures, I decided to experiment with stop motion animation created from charcoal drawings. In "Doorway", one of the first animations I made, I was studying the movement of a figure walking. To do this, I began by drawing myself in a standing position, then erased and redrew my legs in each position, until I had a short animation of a man walking through a doorway. I used the patina of the erased charcoal line from each previous frame to inform the next drawing. As I drew and erased, I invented, reacted and played during the process, resulting in a thirty second clip of a naked man walking up to a doorway to do a pull up, ending with him sitting in a chair and then disappearing into darkness. The animation told a story, while showing the history and process of my drawing.

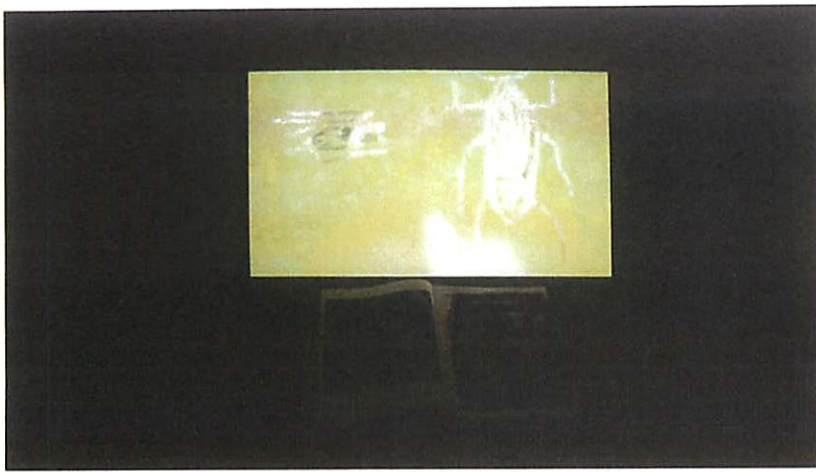


Film still from animation *Doorway*.
2012.

Another example of when process informs content occurs in my book and video installation, "Curmudge". For this project I used the book format to generate chance relationships through the unconscious juxtaposition of images. I created eleven screen-printed monotypes that were randomly arranged, folded and bound. The result was page-spreads that created new images and associations, which I then reacted to through video. In "Curmudge" I explored how the two separate processes of video and printmaking inform each other and lead to various interpretations of similar ideas and imagery.



Curmudge, hand made and bound
book of monoprints, 18"x 24" 2013.



Curmudge, installation with book and video projection. 2013.

Part 4: Humor & Irony

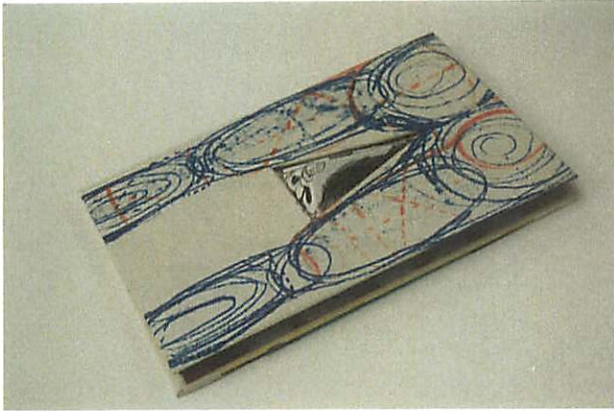
My incorporation of humor informs subject matter within my work and is important to my working process. Often times an idea is triggered by an experience, phrase, or story that I find funny, ironic, or absurd. In “Turbulent Schlemiel”, I create an installation in which I explore my association and idea of the *schlemiel*. Schlemiel is a Yiddish word used to describe a sloppy, clumsy, disheveled person. Now a large part of my everyday vernacular, I began using this word during my final year of undergraduate school with a group of close friends. In this installation I use drawing and video to reference a personal experience of drinking a can of beer, removing my pants, then eating a slice of greasy Domino’s Pizza—a series of events where I felt slightly ashamed, embarrassed, and associate with my interpretation of the schlemiel.

Documentation of *Turbulent Schlemiel*, 2012. Oil pastel on mylar, two projections



While using humor as a device, I am not overtly funny with imagery as I do not want my work to become a series of punch lines. I use humor as a way to develop a narrative, and intentionally leave the subject matter of the imagery somewhat ambiguous. This is apparent in the accordion bound book I made titled “Men Between Legs”. Each page follows a similar format through my depiction of a face framed by the backs of legs. On some pages the subject matter is representational, while on other pages I use this same format to simplify shape, abstracting the content. Through this formal abstraction, the imagery is opened for more personal interpretation. I feel a connection of humor and comedy in the paintings of Amy Sillman. In a review of a 2013 survey of Sillman’s work at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston, critic Robert Moeller writes:

"The painting is rife with messaging, but you're not exactly sure of what sort. Is an itch being scratched or a testicle being removed? The work is funny and immediate, and since nothing certain is being articulated, a flurry of associations come to mind... Sillman uses humor as an entry point into the work and leaves it to the viewer to decipher her intent."²



Men Between Legs, accordion bound book with collage, print, drawing, 2013.

Part 5: Work, Chill, Play, Oy Vey

My most recent work for the 2014 MFA Thesis Exhibition, "Work, Chill, Play, Oy Vey", is a mixed media installation combining drawing, print, and video. I use objects from my living room, porch, and studio to create a scene that straddles the line of being a clear narrative. Towards the center of the composition, a figure sits on a couch facing the video displayed on the mounted iPad, as if he is sitting in his living room watching television. To the right of him, an assembled figure with pink painted hands stands hunched over, wielding a croquet mallet. Surrounding the two figures is an array of objects—a television, houseplant, fan, croquet set, badminton net, shuttle cock, window, and beach umbrella—referencing both an interior space of a living room and the exterior space of a backyard.

Similar to the way director Werner Herzog inserts metaphor, symbolism, and 'non truths' into his documentary films, I want to use reality to inform the "...audiences' wild fantasies."³ I want the viewer to get lost in the image by questioning what they are looking at, and then use recognition of objects, shapes, space, and figures, to find his or her way through the composition. The large screen-printed black badminton net acts as a moment of clear recognition amid the densely collaged center, allowing for the viewer to move his or her gaze upward, as if he or she is checking back into reality.

² "The Persuasive Paintings of a Shamanistic Yenta," by Robert Moeller, December 24, 2013 on art blog Hyperallergic. Accessed on April 29th, 2014 <http://hyperallergic.com/100064/the-persuasive-paintings-of-a-shamanistic-yenta/>

³ "The Colbert Report: Werner Herzog," Comedy Central Video, 4:07, from a broadcast by Comedy Central airing on Monday June 6th, 2011. Accessed on April 29th, 2014 <http://www.colbertnation.com/the-colbert-report-videos/388586/june-06-2011/werner-herzog>. Also expanded upon this idea of fantasy and reality in a research I paper I wrote about the art work of 17th century Dutch printmaker, Hercules Segers.



Collage plays an important role in my thesis work, as I was able to quickly edit imagery and improvise in the museum space. While working on this installation over the course of the semester, I noticed that I was able to keep ideas fresh and energized by making quick, intuitive decisions. I would cut a print, tack it on the wall, and then make my next move. When I tried to recreate these wall collages they would lose their freshness, and end up looking clumsily calculated.

The sense of collage is felt within the video I included in the installation, titled "Oy Vey TV". Playing on the iPad is a video comprised of seven short clips that combine scanned prints, drawings, stop motion and recorded video footage. I manipulated the video and image files in Adobe After Effects and Premiere to mix my animated drawings with recorded footage. We see a clear example of this in the scene where I am riding the 'oy vey horse'. I also utilize the nature of collage through my process of creating the video and animations. While developing these, I made several different clips, and was unsure of how I was going to tie all the footage together. When I felt that I had hit a wall in the video, I would go back to working on the prints and drawings. Simultaneously working on the videos, drawings, and prints unified the final piece, as I allowed each process to inform the other. Similar to my treatment of placing panels over the wheat pasted prints and drawings; I positioned the iPad directly over collaged prints. This emphasized the sense of layering, unifying the digital with the drawn.

When installing the collage and video, my process was intuitive. Being unaware of the outcome fuels my creative process, as I am able to react to each decision. In a 2005 interview, artist Peter Doig discusses the working process of Pierre Bonnard:

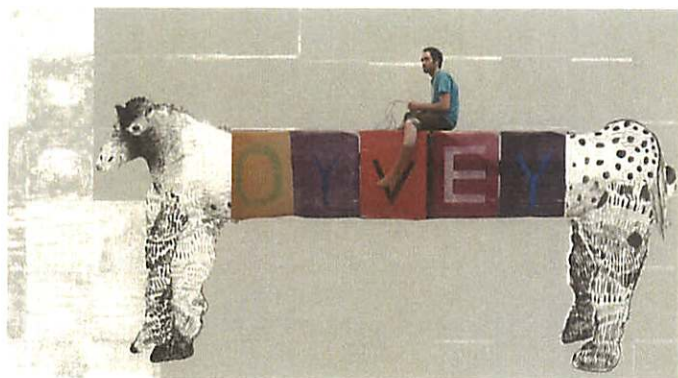
"I don't know about his working habits, but he must have worked on several paintings at once...I don't think he had a master plan...This lack of a master plan is also what allowed him to paint in fragments, without having a conscious will."⁴

Although I had some general idea of how sections would look before I began installing at the museum, I made sure not to cut any of the prints or drawings up until I began to install. In preparation for the installation, I generated as much imagery and content to work from, knowing that only some of it would get used in the final piece. The collage allowed me to piece together drawings and prints enabling for the search and discovery of the final image.

Through a combination of emotional content, imagery, and process, I feel that "*Work, Chill, Play, Oy Vey*", is a reaction and response to my three years of graduate school. The seated figure hunched over on the couch, references a scene during my creative process where I am struggling to work out an idea.

⁴ Peter Doig, Adrian Searle, Kitty Scott, "*Peter Doig*" (Phaidon Press, London 2007) Page 142.

The yard-game provides for rich imagery, as I can use these activities I participated in to create metaphors of human relationships. Badminton, croquet and pétanque relate to activities of leisure— an important aspect of my graduate school experience, as it provided an outlet to share ideas about art, tell jokes, and complain. My inclusion of multiple processes in the final installation, documents my development as an artist during graduate school. I include video and animation, as well as show my exploration of drawing through the printmaking processes of screenprint, drypoint, and the collagraph— a technique I researched in Cuba last summer. "*Work, Chill, Play, Oy Vey*" documents the culmination of my graduate school experience while providing fertile ground for future work.



Top left: Film still from *Oy Vey TV*. playing on iPad in installation.
Top Right: detail of iPad attached to wall



Since completing my installation for the 2014 MFA Thesis Exhibition, I have been reflecting on what I learned during this process, invigorated to expand upon new discoveries. My research in graduate school has fostered experimentation and has provided me with the necessary tools to pursue a professional career and further develop my personal studio practice.