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Preying For A Miracle

By

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of the Requirements for the
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Thank you, Dad, Mom, Matt, and Ethan, for being my biggest fans. I’m so thankful for your unwavering love and support.
The thing I love about oil paint is how vulnerable it is. It is easily manipulated, it can be shoved around with no trouble, and it can cover up anything that the artist no longer wants to see. We can protect it, or we can completely disregard it.

When I begin my paintings, my favorite sight is that of the blank canvas. I know at this stage of the process I will soon mark on the canvas, and it will never be able to return to its pure state again. This same rule applies to fresh brushes, because they will always have color once they meet the palette. Not only will they never be pure white again, but the bristles of the brushes will never lay perfectly like they did before I introduce them to the textures of the canvas or harass them to become the shape and width I desire. The significance in my process of painting is the paint becomes something that can be manipulated, but never fully controlled. There is something gloriously agonizing about this type of ‘beauty’ in relation to painting, because every mark on the canvas is a fleeting moment that can either be frozen in time or lost for eternity.

At the very core of my identity as a painter I could summarize my work by saying I make ugly paintings about ugly things. I’m using the word ‘ugly’ in a way that can best be understood by examining the point of view of Marcia Tucker, a New York based critic and curator. Tucker used the term ‘bad painting’ to lump together a new trend among American figurative painters in the seventies that emerged as a response to movements such as the Minimalism and Conceptualism. Minimalist work can be understood as geometric shapes and forms that are lacking in any expression or décor. Artist Frank Stella was especially successful during this movement.
Stella’s created his series “The Black Paintings” when he moved to the New York art scene in 1958 and his particular technique and concept behind the work gained him a large amount of recognition. Elizabeth Baker analyzes the work at this point in Stella’s career by saying, “These paintings carry to some kind of illusion-prone ultimate the parallel-stripe vocabulary and also refer back to the black works for their degree of relative complexity of sensation; and like the physical unevenness of the blacks, the running Vs’ sullen metallic color has life to it.” (Baker 1) His creation process is described as “penciling lines on blank canvases and going over them with a roller and black house paint. He left thin strips of unpainted canvas to create the white lines that we see”. Stella’s piece Zambezi (Fig 1) is one of the works from his The Black Paintings
series where we can see these small white lines that uniformly lead us to the center of the canvas. Equally as intriguing as the process of creation is his conceptual approach to the work he was creating. In Stella’s eyes the components were what they were; materials cooperating on a canvas.

Tucker’s Bad Painting exhibition was filled with artists who rejected the Minimalist efforts for creating and experiencing art. This exhibition was on display at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York from January 14 to February 28, 1978, and the paintings exemplified a new outrageous outlook on what made a painting good or bad. A line from the original press release reads, “In keeping with the museum’s policy of showing new and provocative work by living artists from throughout the United States, ‘Bad’ Painting raises several controversial issues about the nature and use of imagery in recent American art.” (Cain 1) Our instinctive response of the term ‘bad painting’ would lead us to assume she is making a negative statement about the artist’s ability to make work. We would normally associate this term with poor technical skill and perhaps the inability to use materials effectively. The ‘bad’ Tucker is describing is a purposeful neglect of traditional painting and drawing methods. Most of these figurative pieces ignore the laws of anatomy as well as logic of space. This can be seen in American painter Charles Garabedian’s paintings that were on display at the 1978 exhibition. His piece Jean Harlow (Fig 2) shows a naked female figure lying in an ambiguous outdoor scene. This wouldn’t be considered a typical rendition of a female nude because there is nothing particularly conventionally appealing or romantic about her like her disengaged facial expression and the positioning of her lanky limbs.
If we compare Garabedian’s *Jean Harlow* to Titian’s *Venus with an Organist and Cupid* (Fig 3) we can instantly see the differences in the women’s portrayal in regard to a “good” verses “bad”.
Titian’s masterful paint handling exemplifies excellence in the technical skill dominate in this time period. His nude figure is reclining gracefully upon delicately painted cloth and drapery and is exposing her figure provocatively. Her ideal body type painted in a traditional painting technique of the era is a complete opposite of Garabedian’s take on a similar subject matter because there is less emphasis on norms of ‘beauty’ in Garabedian’s piece. His paint handling is less technical and could even be described as anatomically incorrect and awkwardly painted. However, by placing this nude figure in an open nature scene it still gives the painting’s subject a provocative vulnerable presence like Titian.

When I start my paintings, I typically have a clear theme or situation I want to paint about, which is usually inspired by reflections of past experiences or relationships. Virtually all
my work in the latter half of my undergraduate career deals with subject matter about suffering, discomfort, or anxiety. This type of subject matters allows my ‘bad painter’ approach to figurative work to have a visual language that parallels the conceptual ideas. The element of suffering is displayed physically in the handling of the paint, and my awkward mark-making adds to this discomfort because of the painting’s imagery and content. In the press release for her Bad Painting exhibition Tucker says, “The artists whose work will be shown have discarded classical drawing modes in order to present a humorous, often sardonic, intensely personal view of the world.” (Miller 1) As the creator, there is a feeling of freedom when I don’t have strict obligations to depict imagery as it’s seen in the natural world or follows traditional rules of paint application. This freedom opens me up to a more genuine and personal discovery process in the work. During the initial stages of my painting process, I use rapid expressive mark-making to block in the subjects of the painting. This usually starts with a milky, washed out paint mixture for the initial layer to work from. The lack of saturation does not grant these initial marks with much of a presence on the canvas, which makes it easier to cover and rework them further along in the process. I develop the imagery in my work by working back and forth between moments of control and chaos. This means that in certain areas of the piece I use thinned out wet paint applied with quick gestural marks, and in others I use thicker paint and big blocky forms to create visual contrast. The relationship in my work between subject matter and style of painting compliment each other due to the “ugly” nature of both.

For my BFA Capstone exhibition Preying For a Miracle I analyzed the Biblical book of Job found in the Old Testament in relation to my own life. My interest in the Book of Job stems from a human desire to understand suffering, especially suffering that is unprovoked. At the beginning of the book of Job, Job is described as “blameless and upright; he feared God and
shunned evil”. (Job 1:1) As the first chapter of the book progresses, Satan comes to God and presents a wager. Satan insinuates that Job is only faithful to God because God has “put a hedge around him”. (Job 1:9) Satan proposes that he can make Job curse God’s name if he removes the abundant blessings he has received. God accepts this wager and declares that as long as Job’s life is spared Satan can do with him as he wants, which begins a series of brutal trials. I found myself asking how can such violence and human suffering be justified?

The first painting in my body of work titled, *Head to Toe* (Fig 4), references Job 2:7. In this passage Satan attacks Job’s physical body in the form of boils and sores shortly after killing his family, servants, and livestock. In order to have a more personal and intimate relationship with the story, I assumed the position of ‘Job the Sufferer’ and replaced the ashes that Job sat in (Job 2:8) with symbols, shapes, and colors that I associate with my own family. I then articulated a large exposed figure in front of a crowd of observers seen in the top left corner. The viewer takes in the crowd watching the suffering man, becoming aware of their own presence as one among the crowd of spectators. The central figure’s body was treated very violently with the paint in order to build up a fleshy scab-like texture. The thick physical mark that is made by applying paint with a pallet knife was utilized in this instance to show the horrific condition of Job’s body. The area under the chin and on the leg below the tire was applied with the same intent, but with a different method. I went to the waste bin in our painting studio where my peers dump paint and other medium at the end of our studio time and harvested cans of the waste. I then used my hand to very strategically and intimately spread the waste across the body of the figure.
The extreme physicality of the central figure is offset by the flat blocks of color that make up the environment surrounding it, which creates visual diversity in paint handling. *Head to Toe* proved to be a break-through piece at this juncture, and kickstarted interest in new directions in the creation of this body of work in regard to typology. Typology can be briefly summed up as a method of Biblical interpretation that suggest the Old Testament foreshadows the New Testament. In *Head to Toe*, I depicted a suffering man being passively observed by a crowd. This
scene could be seen to directly foreshadow the crucifixion and suffering of Jesus Christ in the New Testament.

There are a few artists who influenced the composition and imagery in *Head to Toe*. One being William Blake, the English poet, painter, and printmaker, who illustrated the Book of Job in the early nineteenth century. Blake had an obsession with the story of Job, and revisited this subject matter numerous times in his artistic career. of his pieces, *Satan Smiting Job with Boils* (Fig 5), was particularly interesting to me because there is a similarity in its composition in comparison to *Head to Toe*.

![Satan Smiting Job with Boils, William Blake, c.1826, Fig 5.](image1)

![Head to Toe, 2018, oil on canvas. 60” x 72” Fig 4.](image2)

If you compare the figure of Job in Blake’s piece to the ‘Job’ in my own, you can see very similar shapes and forms that are used to direct the viewers interaction with the pieces. Both of the heads are tilted back with eyes that gaze into the upper right corner which creates an implied line for the viewer. Once the viewer travels diagonally across the figure’s bodies, they meet a
curving form that redirects them back into the canvas. In Blake’s *Satan Smiting Job with Boils* the body of Job’s grieving wife stops the viewer’s eye from exiting the canvas at the lower left corner and instead points them back towards the vertical figure in the middle. In *Head to Toe* the man’s deformed foot is what keeps viewers engaged with the painting and directs them to the crowd observing above. This comparison can be seen as a testament to the fact that for years artists used similar tactics to take composition into consideration. In Blake’s piece Satan is represented in human form, whereas in *Head to Toe* I have depicted him as a wolf blending into the crowd. Dana Schutz’s piece *Presentation* was a painting I referenced during the creation of *Head to Toe*. Schutz, an American painter based in New York. There is an obvious relationship between the compositions of *Presentation* and *Head to Toe*, but I was mainly interested in her treatment of the figures and the space they are placed in. In *Presentation*, Schutz does a masterful job placing the figures into an atmosphere we can understand as viewers, thus allowing us to enter this new realm of reality with the figures. I wanted *Head to Toe* to have this same sort of specificity in atmosphere as well as specificity of the observing characters.
In *Presentation*, each member of the crowd has their own personality and identity which separates them from the other figures. This gives the viewer a greater sense of ‘crowded-ness’ because we can focus in on each individual as their own person or being, and in *Head to Toe* I wanted my sea of observers to have these same individual identities. Similar to Schutz’s crowd the crowd in my painting is painted to each have different facial structures and expressions, but unity in the way they are painted.
As I moved forward from the first piece, I found myself drawn to the notion of being transformed as a result of suffering. I was thinking of specific relationships in my past where this feeling of being trapped was heavy, so I began to paint these two figures who were made entirely of rocks. These figures were back to back, and in some places their body parts, or the rock chunks, become interchangeable. While studying Old Testament scripture, I was particularly attracted to Job 41:2, where God uses this idea of the seas’ never-ending depth and the ghastly sea monster the Leviathan to clarify to Job the difference between God and man. Inspired by this humbling act of transformation despite suffering, *Can You Hook It* (Fig 6) became the second piece in my series. When God says to Job that only He understands the depths of the sea, He is placing Himself into a role that is superior and separate from humanity. This separation of Heaven and Earth is shown in *Can You Hook It* by placing a lamb in the lower left corner of the piece.
The lamb serves three main purposes in the painting, the first being an example of the rejection of space as we understand it. Just as Heaven and Earth are two places that don’t exist physically together, the lamb interferes with our understanding of an ocean scene and ignores the rules of the atmosphere. The second purpose of the lamb is as the manifestation of Christ in the piece. Throughout the Old Testament if one wanted to be in the presence of God, one would have to formally sacrifice an animal to invite God into the space. This practice changes in the New Testament when Jesus Christ becomes the ultimate sacrifice, thus allowing man to call to God freely without the ritual of animal sacrifice. The final purpose of the lamb is to balance the painting compositionally and change the speed of the painting - the change of pace is achieved by having a moment in the painting where the mark-making is slower, and the application of paint is more intricate to counterbalance quick gestural marks.

*The Sacrificial Lamb* (Fig 7) by Portuguese artist Josefa de Ayala was used as my inspiration for the lamb’s positioning and shape. I used this specific lamb as a reference in order to indicate that the lamb in my piece held the same religious iconography as Ayala’s painting from the 1670-1684 period.
The lamb in *Can You Hook* is a direct reference of Ayala’s piece, except for the exaggeration of the size of the lamb’s head. The body language of both lambs conveys helplessness, and by placing my lamb in the lower left corner with his back to the other characters I am increasing the lamb’s vulnerability. Another way I indicate the lamb’s innocence was by placing it among violent jutting grass. In Dana Schutz’s piece *Dead Zebra* (Fig 8), she depicts a deceased zebra in the fetal position lying below ferocious vegetation. Schutz takes inspiration for this mark-making from American painter Jasper Johns 1975 piece *Untitled* (Fig 9).
Even though these marks are nonrepresentational they have an aggressive feel to them, which in turn makes the zebra seem that much more innocent. The grass in *Can You Hook It* serves this same purpose.

*Dead Zebra, Dana Schutz, oil on canvas, 2003 Fig 8.*

*Detail, Can You Hook It, 2019, Fig 6*

Christ portrayed as a suffering figure was my final piece for my BFA Capstone exhibition. *Crux of the Matter* (Fig 10) differed from the two preceding works because I was no longer replacing characters or symbols in the narrative with my own. In this piece I was focusing on Christ in the moment of ultimate suffering as He hung on the cross and took His final breath. *Crux of the Matter* was painted in a primarily blue and orange complementary color scheme in order to create visual tension. The face of Christ is in anguish and his nailed hand is both tense and defenseless all at once. His abdomen is falling out into the ground below Him, symbolizing His blood being released into the world. The lilies that make up the blocky vegetation below the figure reference the Virgin Mary because of their similar purity.
Crux of the Matter was created as a response to ‘Job the Sufferer’ shown in Head to Toe. My intention at this point in the show’s assembly was to have the three selected paintings be set up in an altar-like fashion, specifically referencing the Monastery of St Catherine in Mount Sinai. In this church there are painted panels that show Moses encountering God in two separate instances, once through the burning bush, and once while receiving the Ten Commandments. The transfiguration of Christ can be seen in between these pieces just below them. In my arrangement I have the suffering Job of Head to Toe and the humbled Job of Can You Hook It. The crucified Christ of Crux of the Matter hangs between them, just a few inches taller. This is meant to be seen as a typological interpretation of the Book of Job in relation to the crucifixion of Christ.
I chose the name *Preying For a Miracle* for my BFA exhibition as a play on the phrase “praying for a miracle”. The desire for a miracle most likely means something is so beyond a person’s control that it has led them to beg for a magical change in circumstances. At the beginning of this process I was interested in the idea of suffering, and how suffering can be horribly personal and widely universal all at the same time. It has always felt genuine to me to paint about the ‘ugly’ things life has offered me and try to find the twisted beauty and humor in
them. It feels like a splendid act of rebellion to openly face my suffering on an obnoxiously large canvas. I can be bold and aggressive in mark-making and color, but also delicate and reserved. Throughout the creation of these large figurative paintings I have developed a new relationship with the anguish of suffering. Suffering is both my own worst enemy and my most valued muse.

As I move forward in my practice, I question if my “ugly” paint handling is only appropriate because it parallels the nature of the subject. I plan on exploring the possibility of more joyous content in similar painting methods, seeing if the expressive nature of the paint is able to translate successfully.
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