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*East Tennessee State University*

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A Matter of Taste

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A thesis  
presented to  
the faculty of the Department of Art and Design  
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree  
Master of Fine Arts in Studio Art

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by  
Charles Haskins  
August 2011

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Mira Gerard, Chair  
Anita DeAngelis  
Catherine Murray

Keywords: painting, drawing, distortion, narrative, allegory, potato soup

## ABSTRACT

A Matter of Taste

by

Charles Haskins

This thesis paper supports the Master of Fine Arts exhibition at the Slocumb Galleries, East Tennessee State University, from March 14th through March 18th, 2011. The exhibit is composed of nine oil paintings depicting an invented story about two characters who create a soup for a cooking competition. The show *A Matter of Taste* chronicles an allegory concerning the evaluation of creative works. Through Gaudie and Baudie's "odd" recipe this work illustrates the ways in artists and art audiences interact and determine artistic value. The work is inspired by techniques in distortion and narrative painting. The following expands on the ideas, influences, techniques, and concepts that helped to create the exhibit.

## DEDICATION

This exhibition is dedicated to the memory of my father Charles Haskins, Sr. He taught me a great deal about art and life, and I am grateful to have known him.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my committee, Mira Gerard, Anita DeAngelis, and Catherine Murray. Thanks to my friends and family. Thanks to Taryn Malone. Thanks to John Simmons. Thanks to all of the members of Haskins House, and many thanks to my fellow Rain Dogs.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Someone once told me that art is not made in a vacuum. It has taken me several years to understand what this meant, but I have come to believe this statement reveals important information about the relationship between artists and art audiences. Inasmuch as art is about communication, creating art in isolation or in a vacuum does not effectively explain the significance or consequence of creative works. To me this suggests a responsibility and dependency amid the roles of artist and art audience.

The bond between creator and spectator has always fascinated me, particularly because it demonstrates how, collectively, the acts of making and looking help define what art is and how it is experienced. In my work I examine the relationship between artists, art works, and art audiences in order to better understand the nature of art. To do this I often ask questions about authenticity of artistic creations, the process of evaluation, and the authority of artists and art audiences as they attempt to define art.

Through strange narratives with bizarre characters and distorted perspective, I have been creating stories that explore the roles of creator and spectator in order to better appreciate art objects. *A Matter of Taste* is a narrative about two elderly lesbian chefs and a secret potato soup recipe. The work is an allegory concerning artists and art audiences. Most importantly, the series looks at issues of accountability that an artist has to their audience, and the responsibility viewers have in looking at art.



## CHAPTER 2

### ART, ARTISTS, AND AUDIENCE

*Webster's Dictionary* defines the word art as “the expression or application of human creative skill and imagination.” The word artist is defined as “someone who produces art,” and the word audience means “someone who gives attention to something.” Consequently it is the occupation of the artist and art audience to determine the makeup of art.

In trying to understand the nature of art, painter Dana Schutz's work has been a vital resource in my comprehension of what it means to be an artist and what it means to be an audience member. In her work Schutz depicts the roles of creator and spectator by imagining a world populated by only two people. Schutz herself is depicted as the world's last painter, and a man named Frank is the world's final subject—and audience.

Within her series, Schutz portrays Frank as “a sex kitten, ruefully exploited in different poses” much “to Frank's dismay”(Mullins 26). Schutz paints her protagonist Frank over and over again, “obsessively reinventing his nature to her whim” and puts both the subject and audience “under constant scrutiny of her brush” (Mullins 28). Looking at Schutz's work in this context intrigued me because it illustrated the extent to which the artists and audience coexisted. Particularly interesting to me was that Schutz used a minimal number of characters to represent the centuries-old, complex, interdependent relationship between artists and audiences.

Schutz demonstrates two pivotal points: first, that she was dependent on Frank as a subject; and second, that Frank relied on Schutz in order to see himself. The work inspired me to create a similar framework that would allow me to better observe and analyze the roles of the creator and spectator.

Like Schutz's *Frank* series, I wanted to create work that observed the artists interacting with art and art audiences. My thesis show, *A Matter of Taste*, features a

cast of characters whose sometimes humorous and always meaningful encounters illustrate the necessary and delicate relationship that exists between these two groups.

## CHAPTER 3

### DISTORTION

“ A work of art becomes a work of art when one re-evaluates the values of nature and adds one’s spirituality.” -Emile Nodle

After looking at Shutz’s work I began to question my relationship with my subject. I started to manipulate how I rendered figures and changed the appearance of objects in order understand the extent to which I could communicate the information I was presenting. In distorting space and the human figure I wanted to give my pictures a look that was strange. By altering forms I had more control over how my pictures looked.

I have always admired this effect in the drawings and paintings of Vincent Van Gogh, and his influence has been critical to my development as an artist. What I have learned from Van Gogh was that his works subjected the world to his technique. Sunflowers, old shoes, and nature itself became extensions of the artist because Van Gogh’s drawing made him the authority of how objects appeared. “The painter’s attachment to things is not passive or photographic, nor due simply to his origin in a period of naturalistic art, but is a constructive function with deep emotional roots” (Schapiro 97). I have modeled my work after Van Gogh in that through my handling of materials my authorship remains evident.

Painter Maxim Kantor uses distortion the same way. Kantor once said of his own work: “I was afraid to reproduce the common notion of the beautiful. It seemed to me that physical attractiveness was almost dishonest and, at least something anonymous. I did not intend to make ugly faces of the people I loved, but I deliberately leave traces; wrinkles and shadows, asymmetry and disharmony is life evidence after all” (19).

In my work, I try to employ distortion in a similar fashion and try to add specificity to what otherwise would be the anonymous characters. Alterations in appearance are designed to comment on both the characters’ personalities and mental

states. Distortion allowed me to better create characters that had more personality and emotion. Long twisting noses, bulging fat bellies, and wrinkled flesh all symbolically depict specific inner character traits in people.

## CHAPTER 4

### DRAWING

A large amount of the work I make revolves around drawing. Working in the studio I create many sketches in order to generate a variety of subjects. I have found that the exploration and resolution that drawing offers has proven a valuable tool for my work. Sketching allows me to become more familiar with my subject matter, and it permits me to explore a multitude of varying compositions.

I usually begin each piece with a rough sketch and slowly build toward a more solid foundation. Generally I use a contour and gestural lines to quickly map out my compositions (Figure 1, Top Left). I prefer to work this way because it is easier for me to change the composition as I go. This spontaneity not only keeps me interested but also gives me access to alternative arrangements.

Once I am confident that I have orientated my subject effectively, I use black and white acrylic paint to create a value scale (Figure 1, Top Right). After the acrylic paint dries, I begin to add elements of color with oil paint. (Figure 1, Bottom Left). This process always varies as I like to paint and draw over sections frequently and let the under painting show in the finished painting.

Exploiting materials and allowing brush strokes and gestures to show helps to emphasize the emotion and expression of the painting. In this way my paintings rely on expressive forms and expressive marks to help identify what the people in my paintings are like (Figure 1 Bottom Right).



Figure 1: Work In Progress, 2010

## CHAPTER 5

### PAPER CLAY

The painter Thomas Hart Benton once said that it is an artist's job "to decide what is important and then uncover how to orientate it so that its importance will be felt" (11). I found that using distortion helped me greatly in orientating my subject, but I realized there was a lot of information about my subject left to uncover.

In order to further develop my work, I began to look for an approach that could enhance my drawings and would give me access to more information about the figure. After some researching I found out that Benton himself had a similar problem. I discovered that he had resolved his lack of resources by creating clay miniatures to paint from. Working from his miniatures, he was able to easier work with light and shadow (Benton 45).

To find out more about this process, I took an independent study course with Mr. Don Davis. He gave me a paper clay recipe that would be malleable enough to sculpt with. After mixing the paper clay I began to sculpt some scenes from my sketches. Working in the round. I quickly saw there was much more information to deal with (as opposed to only working in two dimensions like I had been up to this point.) The clay slowly made me rethink how I was drawing. By creating a figure in the round I was able to much easier turn a figure in space and arrive at alternative compositions. I was also able to further exaggerate shapes and quickly arrive at distortion (Figure 2). I also thought more and more about the space around figures.



**Figure 2: Baudie Paper Clay Model, 2009**

On completion of these small sculptures I would set them up in my painting studio and light them (Figure 3). It was immediately apparent that I could get the information about space and light I needed.



**Figure 3: Gaudie Paper Clay Model, 2009**



## CHAPTER 6

### CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

After finding out more about the way I wanted my paintings to look, I felt that I could become more specific about the people in my pictures. In order to develop the characters within my paintings, I started to think more about what they were like, where they lived, and further explored their motivations. Developing characters with drawing and paper clay helped me to produce strong personas, but I thought it was important to spend more and more time with each character in order to know them better. After awhile of drawing the same people over and over I began to feel for my characters in a way that exceeded my initial caricature and distortion studies.



**Figure 4: Gaudie And Baudie Sketch, 2009**

To further develop the people in my paintings I began to give them names, pets, and hobbies (Figure 4). As I did so, I became more and more interested in their lifestyles. I began to humanize the characters on a life-size scale.

#### *The Golden Era Taste Testing Committee*

In the fall of 2008 I was working on a painting titled *The Golden Era Society*. The painting depicted a scene of three elderly women gathered together to discuss the latest gossip. The grouping of women references Grant Wood's painting *The Daughters of Revolution*. The name *Golden Era Society* came from the radio program *Lum and Abner* in which Lum and Abner create an organization to discuss "high culture topics" in order to "raise the level of ignorance" in the community (Hall 84).

The thing that attracted me the most about this group was that it was their sole purpose to talk about other people, and that they were onlookers detached from the things they were talking about. On his album *Blonde On Blonde*, Bob Dylan's song "Visions of Johanna" describes a set of similar women looking at art in a museum. In the song, Dylan depicts a group of fat, mustachioed women, and juxtaposes symbols of high and low culture as though "classicism were a haughty lady being raped by a bluesy stud" (Goldstein 339). His lyrics inspired me to use distortion to give the women long noses that were literally stuck in the air.

### *Gaudie and Baudie*

I first started work on *Gaudie and Baudie* in the spring of 2009, when I saw a television program about a woman who carved and ate deep fried potato dildos. To say the least, I was surprised by her actions, and even more surprised by the fact that I was even seeing them broadcast. Watching the creation and use of these dildos made me feel uncomfortable, but when I listened to the woman explain why she was making potato dildos, my attitude about the activity changed.



**Figure 5: Last Minute Instructions, 2011**

She simply said that, for her, the process of carving and eating a potato dildo transcended the mundane feelings she associated with sex. She went on to say that she had a need for sensation. After I got over the shock of what I had seen, I thought that I could make a similar statement in justifying why I make art. By basing the characters Gaudie and Baudie off this televised program, I wanted to explore and understand who Gaudie and Baudie were and what their personalities were like. I modeled both characters in clay and drew them constantly. I caught myself imagining Gaudie and Baudie as they went about their day-to-day lives. I pictured them grocery shopping, going to church, driving in the car, and working in their garden (Figure 5.) I imagined conversations between the two and got to know their likes and dislikes. I even drew blueprints of their house.

## CHAPTER 7

### THE STORY

The paintings in this exhibit are held together by a narrative that spans over nine segments. Each painting tells a part of the same story and is meant to be viewed in a specific sequence. The scenes depict the making of Gaudie and Baudie's potato dildo soup. The series chronicles both the creation of the soup and gives an account of the soup's final presentation at the taste-testing contest. To tie each picture together, I repeated characters and objects like a metal pot, yellow blanket, and Gaudie and Baudie's cat, Cleopatra. Watching the characters' interactions allowed me to better observe Gaudie and Baudie in their roles as creators and the committee's position as spectators.

The series starts with a picture of the taste-testing committee outside the home of Gaudie and Baudie. The three elderly women that make up the taste-testing committee are seen delivering an entry form for the taste-testing competition. To express the personality of the owners, I made the exterior of the house crooked and awkward. I based the architecture on a building in my neighborhood and painted the house from life. This experience was much like working from my paper clay models.

Succeeding this painting is a piece titled *Gaudie and Baudie*. In the picture Gaudie and Baudie are seen sitting in their living room and are relaxing on the sofa. I intended the piece to serve as the introduction to the characters and their habits. Gaudie is seen looking over the entry form she received from the Golden Era Committee and Baudie is flipping through television stations. I wanted to show Gaudie and Baudie in their day-to-day life. I painted Baudie with a bowl on her stomach to portray the moment as unflatteringly casual. To make the environment seem even more real, I created furniture and décor including small photographs of a battleship, a mountain, and, near the entrance to the kitchen, a small picture of Noah's ark.

The next painting, *The Mating of Eagles*, takes place inside Gaudie and Baudie's bedroom. In this picture Gaudie is peeling potatoes while Baudie is

brushing her hair. The title of the painting refers to Gaudie and Baudie's relationship and explains that like eagles, Gaudie and Baudie are a special breed. This bond can be seen subsequently in *Gaudie, Baudie, and Cleopatra*, when the peeled potatoes are brought into the kitchen. Gaudie and Baudie's cat Cleopatra watches as Gaudie carries in the pot, the yellow blanket, and the freshly carved potato dildo. The painting is an allusion to *The Artist and His Model* by Ernest Kirchner. I posed Gaudie in the same position and even dressed her in a similar robe that Kirchner wears. To point out Gaudie's role as a creator, I replaced Kirchner's paintbrush with the dildo potato.

In "*The Potato Eaters*", Gaudie and Baudie are seen preparing their potato dildo soup. The painting documents their cooking processes as well as illustrates their passion for cooking. I tried to show that the preparation of the soup was a delicate process motivated by perfection rather than perversion, and to do this I arranged their tools much like an artist preparing his palette. In painting this picture I wanted to show how the making of the soup was much like a ritual and a part of their day-to-day lives.

In the next painting entitled *Gaudie, Baudie, and the Russet Potato*, the couple is seen using the potato dildos. Gaudie is holding the potato dildo behind her back and Baudie is seated on the blanket with her legs spread. I used the moment leading up to the use of the potato to add a feeling of suspense and shock. To further intensify this moment I used lemon and cadmium yellow straight from the tube to contrast the dark background and used colors that are much more saturated. I also let the sharp lines of the under painting show through to help give the final painting a dynamic character.

In order to expand upon the idea that Gaudie and Baudie were artists who cared about their soup, I painted a scene where Baudie was sampling the soup. Plucking a pubic hair from the concoction, Baudie makes sure that both the taste and presentation are perfect. When Gaudie and Baudie's soup is finally ready, the committee gathers and Baudie begins to distribute the soup. As the committee awaits to be served, I show the perverse and awkward nature of the audiences' position by

examining the voyeuristic qualities that have transformed the committee from passive observers into invested participators.

## CHAPTER 8

### THE SOUP

In the story *A Matter of Taste*, the soup is a product of potato dildos and lesbian sex, but its function is that of an art object. It is responsible for bringing artists like Gaudie and Baudie together with their audience. The soup is the connective tissue between the two groups and offers both sides a chance to exercise their ideas about what art is. Gaudie and Baudie's dildo potato soup looks at the position of both artist and audience as they interact with an art object. The characters are all involved in a power struggle concerning authority. The tasting of the soup as part of a contest judging provides a scenario where the artists' and the audience's ideas about art must confront each other. The soup becomes an argument about the status of art.

The allegory is intended to reveal an appreciation for unconventional sensory experiences and a celebration of differences in taste. The soup also demonstrates that neither the artist nor the audience can separate themselves from each other. Both groups are dependent on the existence of the art object in order to maintain their identities. It is Gaudie and Baudie's position to create, and the committee's to consume—but the art itself exists despite any argument the two parties might have over the legitimacy of the soup.

## CHAPTER 9

### SUMMARY

In creating pictures that examine the relationship between art, artists, and audience, I wanted to better understand the responsibilities involved with creating and viewing art. Making this work has taught me that the roles of artists, art, and audience all have occupational obligations that intertwine and cannot be separated.

In conclusion, I believe that our job as creators and spectators is not to find the maximum amount of content in an artwork or divide art objects into categories of “good” and “bad.” It is more important that as we look around and evaluate what we see, and that we remain sensitive to how and what it is we are seeing. It is our job as artists and art audiences to see more, hear more, and feel more acutely so that we may better understand the act of creating and the process of looking. As Pablo Picasso once said, “The aim of art should be to make more works of art, and by analogy make our own experience more, rather than less, real to us” (Picasso 361).



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APPENDIX:

CATALOGUE OF EXHIBITION



**Photograph of exhibition inside the Slocumb Galleries.**

2011



*The Soup*

Oil on Panel

24"x24"

2010



*The Golden Era Taste Testing Committee Outside the Home of Gaudie and Baudie Jimson*

Oil On Canvas

35"x35"

2011



***Gaudie and Baudie***

Oil On Canvas

68"x55"

2011



***The Mating of Eagles***

Oil On Canvas

30"x42"

2011



*Gaudie, Baudie, and Cleopatra in the Kitchen*

Oil On Canvas

36"x54"

2011



***The Potato Eaters***

Oil On Panel

72"x48"

2011





***Gaudie, Baudie, and the Russet Potato***

Oil On Canvas

48"x60"

2011



*Baudie Samples The Soup*

Oil On Canvas

48"x60"

2011



*The Golden Era Taste Testing Committee Awaits Gaudie Jimson's Homemade Potato Dildo Soup*

Oil On Canvas

72"x72"

2011

VITA  
CHARLES HASKINS

Education:

2011, M.F.A., Painting, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City Tennessee

2008, B.F.A., Painting, (Minor: Art History), Shawnee State University, Portsmouth, Ohio

Experience:

Teaching Assistantship (Instructor of Record), East Tennessee State University,

Two Dimensional Design, Fall 2010 – Spring 2011

Graduate Assistantship, East Tennessee State University,  
Figure Drawing, Spring 2009 - Spring 2010

Graduate Assistantship, East Tennessee State University,  
Drawing, Fall 2008

Solo Exhibitions:

2011, *A Matter of Taste*, Slocumb Galleries, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee

2008, *Charles Haskins' Recent Works*, The Mazier Gallery, Southern Ohio Museum, Portsmouth, Ohio.

2007, *The Rain Dogs Live*, Promenade Gallery, Vern Riffe Center for the Arts, Shawnee State University, Portsmouth, Ohio

2004, *Irony's Itch*, Promenade Gallery, Vern Riffe Center for the Arts, Shawnee State University, Portsmouth, Ohio

Selected Group Exhibitions:

2011, *Son of Canked*, Tipton Galery, Johnson City, Tennessee.

2011, *Composed*, East Tennessee Graduate Exhibition, Johnson City, Tennessee.

2010, *Transverse Orientation*, Nelson Fine Art Center, Johnson City, Tennessee.

2010, *Evening with the Arts*, Downtown Kingsport Art Center, Kingsport, Tennessee

2010, *Canked*, Johnson City Area Arts Council, Johnson City Tennessee.

2010, *Stimulus*, East Tennessee Graduate Exhibition, Johnson City, Tennessee.

2008, *Cream of the Crop*, Southern Ohio Museum, Portsmouth, Ohio.

2008, *Haskins House*, Appleton Gallery, Shawnee State University, Portsmouth Ohio.

2008, *State of the World: An Appalachian Perspective*, The Multicultural Center Gallery, Baker Center, Ohio University, Athens, Ohio.

Awards:

2007, Third Place, *Juried Student Show*, Appleton Gallery, Shawnee State University, Portsmouth Ohio. Juror: Donald Van Horn Dean, College of Fine Arts Marshall University

2005, Best of Show, *Juried Student Show*, Appleton Gallery, Shawnee State University, Portsmouth Ohio.

2004, Best of Show, *Juried Student Show*, Appleton Gallery, Shawnee State University, Portsmouth Ohio.

2004, First Place Painting, *Connections with the Divine*, Shawnee State University, Portsmouth, Ohio. Juror: James Allen, Fine Arts Chair, University of Rio Grande