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DUNIDEDCUDIGUNADIE

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

by

Lawrence V. Reid

May 2020

Andrew Scott Ross, Committee Chair

Dr. Scott Contreras-Koterbay

Vanessa Mayoraz

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ABSTRACT

DUNIDEDCUDIGUNADIE

by

Lawrence V. Reid

The artist discusses his Master of Fine Arts exhibit, titled *DUNIDEDCUDIGUNADIE*. The exhibit is to be held at the Tipton Gallery in downtown Johnson City, TN, from April 2nd to April 10th, 2020. A live reception will be held the evening of April 3rd, featuring a performance with the work, titled *Look at You!*

The following thesis explores the artist's formative years – investigating how childhood experiences combine with artistic and theoretical influences to inform his art-making process.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Monsters come in all shapes and sizes. Some might have long, blood-drenched fangs and wear black capes. Others might be cobbled together from corpses with bolts protruding from their necks. Even though these monstrous tropes may be capable of inducing nightmares, there's still yet another type of monster that hits closer to home. That would be the monster that resides within . . . that which is suppressed by societal expectations.

How do these particular monsters even get there in the first place? Author David D. Gilmore attempts to explain: "... monsters embody a variety of inner states, many sharply contradictory. One of these states stems from fear, a fear not only of the dangerous external world, but of the self" (Gilmore 193). Gilmore expands on this concept by circling back to childhood:

. . . the child also identifies with the monster, for it embodies his or her own "bad self."

Children wish to be good, that is, to conform to the ideals propagated by parents and society, but they know that they are not. They harbor hostile, erotic, and aggressive impulses, so they invent the monster and drive it into the unconscious (193).

What happens then, if that monster is brought to the surface; raised from the bowels of the unconscious? The answers to that question largely depend on what kind of dire necessities are faced by the individual child. In the case of my own childhood, I'll say that I am fortunate to have had access to art as a creative outlet. Through drawings and other forms of storytelling, I was able to harness my own "bad self" and give a voice to the monsters that dwelled within.

This process was first memorable at age nineteen, during my years at Miami-Dade Community College.

I grew up in the city of North Miami Beach, Florida. I was never quite the fan of the “party lifestyle” that Miami is known for. I recall one of my earliest college art projects called for a mixed-media collage drawing, representing my feelings toward Miami (Fig. 1). This was the first instance where I recall truly infusing my “bad self” into my art, while presenting in a public setting. During the critique for this project, I told the entire class that Miami should burn in Hell. My first college art instructor, Professor Jon D. Kitner, recounts the experience:

Larry explained his imagery and when he got to the part about Miami being nuked, the class stopped and, then and only then, he said, “And frankly, that’s what you all deserve.”



Fig. 1: *Miami Photo Collage*, 1999. Photocopy print and Prismacolor pencils.

This formative experience started a path for me to use art as an expression of anger as opposed to an enactment of anger. Art became a therapeutic outlet for me.

Despite having this outlet, growing into an adult has taught me that the ideas expressed through art are not always best served in social settings. I became more self-aware and realized that I couldn't casually tell Miamians to go to Hell – if I wished to keep my safety and avoid consequence. As I moved on to undergrad college, I still made subversive art. However, I found myself compromised by how I felt pressured to act in social situations. In other words, if I wasn't comfortable with people, I put on a mask. I succumbed to the unspoken pressure of smiling more than I wanted. As I continue to explore the intentions behind my work, certain questions remain that beg for clarity: How does one use an artistic outlet to reconcile the inner self with the public persona? And how can negative aspects of the past be used to create a positively fulfilling present?

CHAPTER 2

PROCESSING PAIN THROUGH ART

My initial thought when describing my process of creating work is that it serves a therapeutic function. The art allows me to explore dangerous themes that might be best avoided in real life. I often wonder, as I've observed non-artist acquaintances – some who rely on the indulgence of alcohol and other external substances – if I did not have access to a creative outlet, would I indulge in those very same things? Then I question if I may be indulging in something worse...

The first body of work that I'd like to discuss is my series of *Ink-Wash Drawings*. These works were created using a medium called Derwent *Inktense Blocks* – solid ink blocks that may be applied dry, but also achieve a painterly aesthetic with the application of water. This body of work began as two things: first, they were an homage to the aesthetics of children's book illustrator Stephen Gammell, whose drawings from the *Scary Stories* book series of the 80's and 90's were among the earliest of my artistic inspirations (Fig. 2). Secondly, they were a reaction to a tumultuous adolescent relationship with my mother – whose personality and mood shifted dramatically from one moment to the next. I would say that at least a third of the works are portraits of my mother (Fig. 3).

There were times when I saw her as a monster, so I drew her as a monster. More importantly, I made the drawings to hurt what my mother loved most – namely, her own public self-presentation. For a woman who prioritizes outward presentation above all else, I knew that nothing could hurt her more than to destroy the façade and expose the monster that I perceived to lurk underneath. So that's what I did, within the confines of my own work. I used my art to hurt

people that brought pain to me – gaining a sort of fantastical and imaginary revenge, while also convincing myself that I had attained a measure of justice.

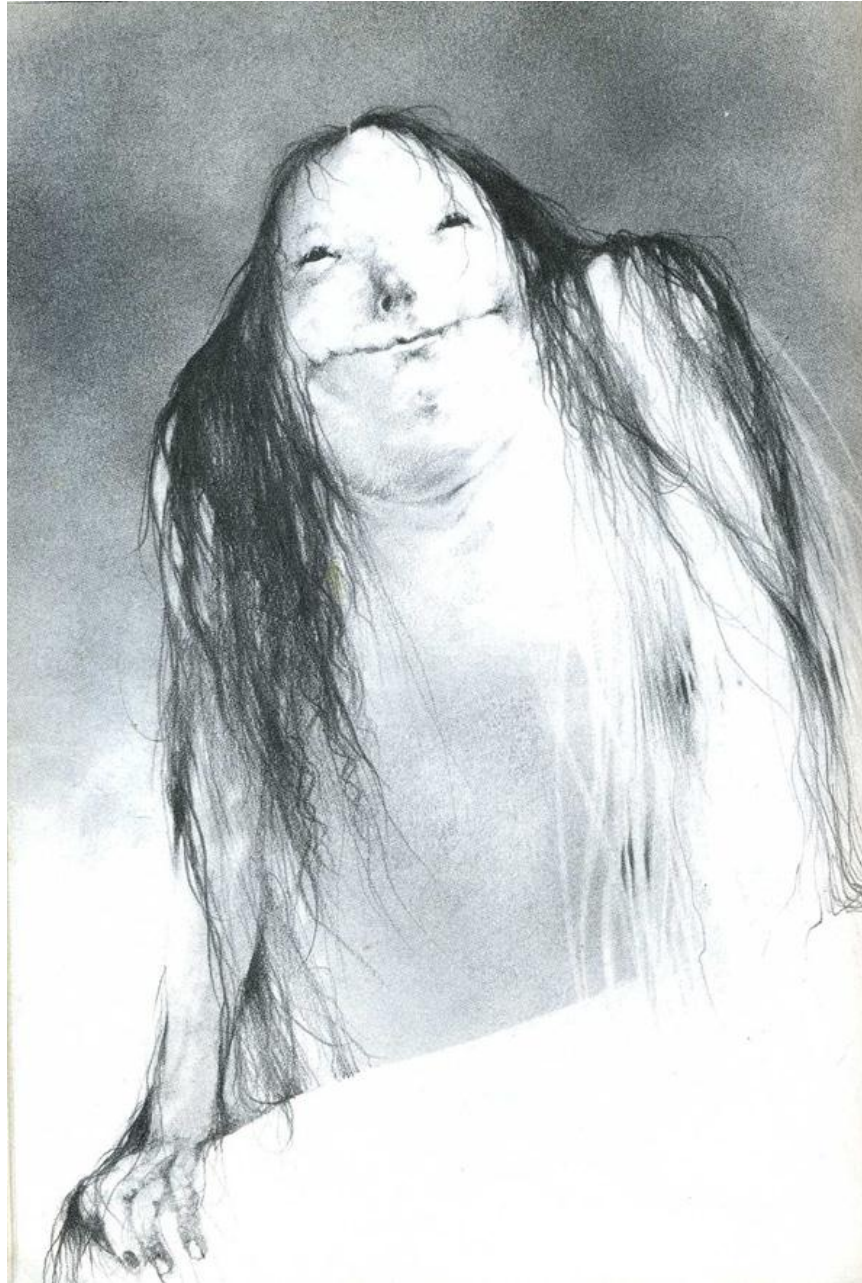


Fig. 2: *The Pale Lady*, by Stephen Gammell. *Scary Stories 3: More Tales to Chill Your Bones*, 1991.



Fig. 3: *Beaming*, 2017. (A portrait of my mother)

This concept of hurting people through art also applies to my *Shadow Mask* series. This series of work consists of masks made from found material – primarily cardboard. The jagged pieces of cardboard are assembled in a slightly abstract manner, evoking a distorted social outlook while symbolizing my inner Shadow Archetype. Most of the masks are concoctions of my imagination – although some are meant to inflict pain. The mask titled *Power* – a representation of Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell – represents what I see as an accomplice to murder (Fig. 4).

The mask represents a man who, in my view, continuously allows the wide sale of firearms, resulting in the undeniably dangerous state of gun violence that continues to plague the United States. The mask serves an effigy – bringing forth the ugliness that I see within this particular individual. Similarly, the mask titled *Endangered* – an effigy of the United States’ National Bird – is a fallen symbol of pride that is no longer capable of upholding its ideals of power and perseverance (Fig. 5).



Fig. 4: *Power*, 2019



Fig. 5: *Endangered*, 2019

CHAPTER 3

BECOMING A MONSTER

The Shadow Series as a whole (which collectively include my Ink-Wash Drawings and Shadow Masks) began as a response to the internalization of my surroundings. I've been drawing monstrosly grotesque creatures since I was about nine years old, but I don't think I became truly serious about these artworks until 2016. It was around this time that I saw people around me as monsters. I saw my mother as a monster. I even wanted to see myself as a monster. This explains why several of my ink-wash drawings are either self-portraits or portraits of my mother. Why would I want to be a monster?

The answer to this question goes back much farther than I even care to recall. My father was sixty years old at the time I was born. When I reached the age of ten or eleven, I began to take note of his age – especially in comparison to the parents of my childhood friends. At that young age, I understood that my father would die before any of my friends' parents. From that moment forward, I thought of death every day – pondering the moment my father would die. Would it happen in his sleep? Or would he die during one of his hospital stays? These were the questions that occupied my adolescent mind. Although I loved my dad, I harbored resentment towards him. As he grew older during my teenage years, he could do fewer and fewer activities with me. I was angry with him for having a child at such an old age. I viewed my father as a symbol of weakness.

It was around this time that I was introduced to two of the most influential art forms of my childhood: Professional wrestling and horror movies. Wrestling didn't capture my imagination as much as one of its characters did – an undead Western mortician aptly named The Undertaker (Fig. 6). The Undertaker counterbalanced the physical weakness I associated with my father by showing me what strength looked like... and it was an unstoppable strength. An opponent would body slam The Undertaker, but he would sit right up like a zombie. He would absorb hits from metal chairs – and not even flinch. As a kid, I was absolutely enamored with this display of unnatural power. The Undertaker was the first “monster character” I ever saw, and I was hooked. From there, I dived right into the horror film genre – getting my fix for strength by watching other unstoppable monsters such as Jason Voorhees from the *Friday the 13th* series (Fig. 7), and Michael Myers from John Carpenter's 1978 slasher hit, *Halloween*. These characters couldn't be stopped. Even when they appeared defeated, they always rose from the grave. They were, and still are, a symbol of persistence... a symbol of power....



Fig. 6: The Undertaker, circa 1991. Image courtesy of WWE.com.



Fig. 7: Jason Voorhees, *Friday the 13th: Part VII: The New Blood*, 1988. Image courtesy of Fridaythe13thfranchise.com.

CHAPTER 4

THEORETICAL INFLUENCES

Part One: The Shadow Archetype by Carl Jung

“Carl Jung has pointed out that the shadow cast by the conscious mind of the individual contains the hidden, repressed and unfavorable (or nefarious) aspects of the personality” (Henderson 110). Author C.A. Meir goes on to explain that the primitive human would embrace the shadow in a literal sense, even going so far as to kill anyone who dare steps on their shadow – feeling completely justified in the process (92). Dr. Achim Schafer supports this idea, noting that these kinds of primitive behavioral patterns are most prevalent during stress-inducing, dangerous and even life-threatening scenarios (189).

In order to understand this concept in conjunction with Jung’s teachings, Henderson adds, “we must go back to the first dire necessity that occurred in our life, which made it inevitable for us to deal somehow with the dark aspect of our own nature...” (93) This brings me to a recollection of my first dire necessity as a child.

After my parents divorced when I was ten years of age, my mother began a relationship with another man, whom will be referred to as “Prick” for the entirety of this writing. After my mother and I moved into a new apartment, Prick moved in with us, shortly following the divorce. About two months later, my mother became pregnant with Prick’s child. Not long after that, it was discovered that Prick cheated on my mother during her pregnancy. All was forgiven, though; and this would be the first in a long line of incidents committed by Prick against my mother. With this first incident, my disdain for Prick was already established.

The desire to punish Prick for mistreating my mother grew with each passing day. It was when Prick decided to punish me that I recall first truly acquainting with my own shadow

archetype. After an argument one day, Prick entered my bedroom and chose to punish me by taking away my television. As he bent at the knees to lift my overly heavy tube television, I distinctly recall fantasizing myself kicking him in the genitals and proceeding to beat him to a pulp with my nearby baseball bat. The hatred was already steeped into my mind for his treatment of my mother; however, Prick made it more personal by taking my belongings. Despite my anger, I felt powerless – I did nothing. I sat there, seething, knowing that I would lose a physical fight to an adult more than twice my size. Prick continued to torment my mother and I for the next decade; whether he was living with us or making constant phone calls from prison.

Fast forward nearly twenty years later, and here I am as an adult in graduate school. At the time that I created the video performance piece titled, *Cooking with Doo Trilogy*, even I was unaware of the historical significance and the long-lost desire of my shadow that would finally be realized (Fig. 8).

Cooking with Doo Trilogy features the title character, Doo, struggling for nearly five minutes to perform a simple task – making a sandwich. After persevering and finally finishing the sandwich with its top slice of bread, Doo exits the scene before an intruder – The Pig Thief – sneaks into view, surveying the surroundings (Fig. 9). With no sign of Doo in sight, the Thief quickly steals an entire loaf of bread – scampering off after the lights mysteriously turn off.

Simply not content with the bread he's stolen, the Thief returns, this time with intentions of claiming Doo's prize: the sandwich itself. As the intruder readies himself to claim the food, a hammer is swiftly brought down upon his skull – rendering him helpless as he convulses in agony. With some degree of consciousness, the Thief looks upon the hammer, now raising into the air, and is horrified as the blunt tool drops again, this time crushing his sternum (Fig. 10).

Now with only a glimmer of consciousness, the Thief's arm slowly twitches as he fades into oblivion – before being dragged off screen.



Fig. 8: Still image from *Cooking with Doo Trilogy*, 2018



Fig. 9: Still image from *Cooking with Doo Trilogy*, 2018



Fig. 10: Still image from *Cooking with Doo Trilogy*, 2018

Part Two: Civilizations and Its Discontents by Sigmund Freud

In the book, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Dr. Sigmund Freud states, “the avoidance of pain does not produce the happy feeling of satisfying a need” (Freud 00:00:00-02:15:00). By this logic, I have chosen to use my art as a means to confront my own pain, head on. However, the question remains . . . what is the need I attempt to satisfy by confronting this pain?

The answer, in short, is that I satisfy my need to rebel and exercise sadism. Against what, am I rebelling, though? Freud goes on to state, “beauty, cleanliness and order hold a distinct place amongst the needs of a civilization” (Freud 00:00:00-02:15:00). Throughout my entire body of work, I have clearly opposed these conventions; choosing instead to depict degrees of ugliness, filth and chaos. Traditional beauty is absent from the ink-wash drawings and masks, while chaos reigns supreme in the universe of the Doo character. The mask series can be seen as physically deformed versions of their source material. For example, the mask titled *Self-Portrait I* addresses the earlier stated need to view myself as a monster (Fig. 11). It is also intentionally expressionless, with the lack of emotion serving as a safeguard (or security blanket) to protect myself from the various pains produced by the external world.

Supporting this idea, Freud notes that “to guard against the suffering inflicted by human relationships, the recommendation is intentional isolation . . . keeping yourself distant from others” (Freud 00:00:00-02:15:00). Under these parameters, I have no doubt that my own work has served to alienate myself from the community around me. That alienation, however, functions with a duality. The reactions (or non-reactions) incurred by my work have made me better aware of any communicative pretense that may be presented towards me, allowing me to understand when to disengage from said communication. After all, Freud maintains, “the happiness achieved by [intentional isolation] is the happiness of silence” (00:00:00-02:15:00).



Fig. 11: *Self-Portrait Mask # 1*, 2019

CHAPTER 5

ARTISTIC INFLUENCES

Part One: Bruce Nauman and Clown Torture

“The true artist helps the world by revealing mystic truths.” This is the title of Bruce Nauman’s 1967 neon sign piece, which according to author Coosje van Bruggen, implies a poetic message regarding the artist’s role within contemporary society (van Bruggen 15). If the role of the artist within contemporary society is indeed to reveal “mystic truths,” then what could these truths possibly be?

To answer this question, I looked towards Bruce Nauman’s landmark 1989 video installation, titled *Clown Torture*. Described by critics as “unbearable” and “excruciating,” *Clown Torture* uses a popular symbol of fear – the clown – to assault audiences with an onslaught of jarring repetition (Weintraub 71). The reason I’ve returned to this arresting piece of sensory overload so often during my graduate career is because of the connection it maintains with my own art. Nauman’s video and my own video work reveal the same “mystic truths” of human suffering; by using performance elements to enact scenes of extreme discomfort – asking the viewer to confront their own suffering in the process.

This brings me to a specific segment within Nauman’s *Clown Torture* spectacle – *Clown with Goldfish* (Fig. 12). Writer Michael Leddy describes *Clown with Goldfish* as a man struggling to balance a fishbowl against a ceiling using only a broom handle (Leddy 1). As I watched this video numerous times, I began formulating my own theories to make sense of what was happening. Observing the clown struggle to balance such a fragile object atop the narrow tip

of a broom handle led me to conclude that the fishbowl (and its contents) served as a symbol of the clown's very own sanity.



Fig. 12: *Clown with Goldfish*, still image from *Clown Torture*, 1987. By Bruce Nauman.

For me, this explained why the clown repeatedly stretched his arm to reach for the bowl, in addition to carefully balancing it. The clown tried desperately to maintain his sanity but was ultimately placed in a futile “lose/lose” situation. While keeping the fishbowl firmly against the ceiling with the broom handle, there is no practical way that he can reach it with his arm. However, if the clown lowered the broom handle to bring the bowl closer to him, it would surely drop to the ground, shattering in the process.

Becoming enamored with the execution of themes on Nauman’s video no doubt played a role inspiring the creation of my own video performance work: *The Doo Series*. Mentioned previously as a vicarious re-enactment of childhood desires, this series of videos features a character named *Doo*, who has been a part of my life since age fourteen. I created the *Doo* character with my childhood friend, Ricky; and the *Doo* character serves the purpose of a scapegoat – while being represented as a crude hand puppet. Several parallels can be drawn between Bruce Nauman’s clowns and the obnoxious *Doo* character. Aside from the obvious, such as makeup and wigs, the underlying themes of struggle and hopelessness permeate throughout both works. And much like the clown struggling to grasp his sanity in the form of a simple fishbowl, *Doo* makes shorter attempts to grasp what’s left of his sanity, through seemingly mundane tasks such as drawing a picture or making a sandwich. The difference between the two works being that *Doo* eventually submits to the struggle and embraces his inner madness – that which is created by suffering . . .

Whereas Nauman’s clown tries to desperately keep his “fishbowl of sanity intact,” it could be argued that *Doo* wastes little time before throwing his fishbowl against a wall, completely shattering it. For instance, as seen in the first episode of my series, *Drawing with Doo*, the title character spends a total of six seconds attempting to draw calmly before slamming

his pencil on the desk and laughing (Fig. 13). He decides to give sanity one more shot, first struggling to pick back up the pencil, before spending only thirteen more seconds painfully making rudimentary marks on his paper. After slamming the pencil down again (even harder this time), the “gloves are off.” Doo motions his denial of sanity, moving his head from side to side and saying “no” in his own child-like language. Diving into chaos, *Doo* reduces the neatly organized art table into shambles, throwing a temper tantrum for the next four-plus minutes (Fig. 14).

Sadly, for Doo, however, even his attempts to create chaos are not without suffering. He struggles momentarily before knocking over a tray of colored pencils. From there, *Doo*'s manic laughter transforms into a fit of coughing – the sounds of mucus embedded throughout the scene. The physical pain from coughing takes a new turn, as Doo then repeatedly slams his face against the table. *Doo* undergoes yet another fit of maniacal laughing, before finally breaking down and sobbing within the ruins of the art supplies.



Fig. 13: Still image from *Drawing with Doo*, 2018

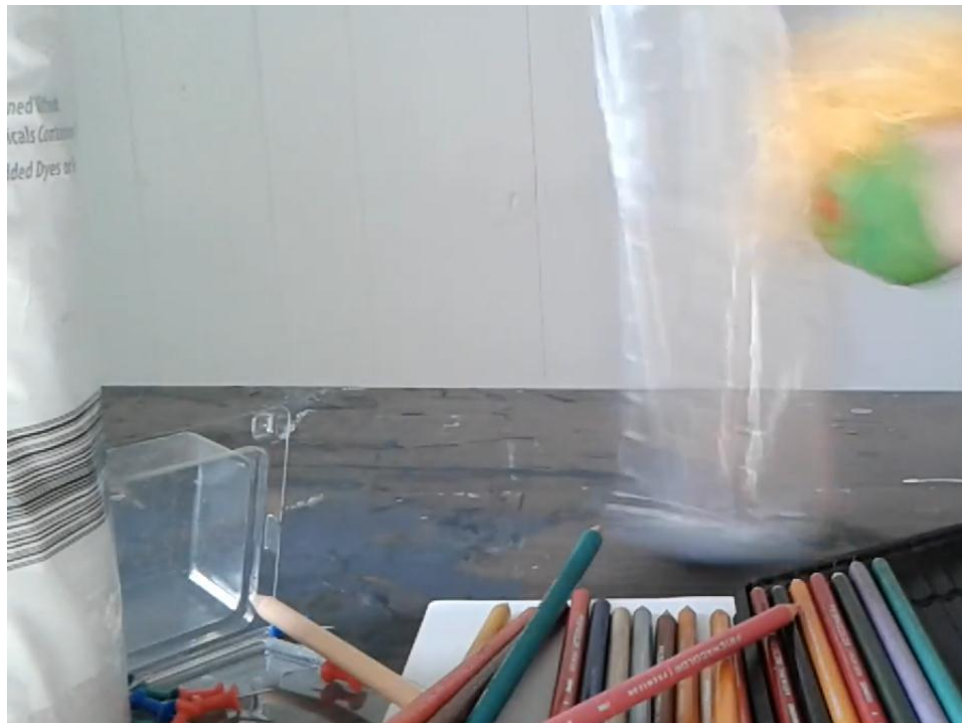


Fig. 14: Still image from *Drawing with Doo*, 2018

This transformative process of emotions is evident in another of Nauman's *Clown Torture* segments, although in a more nuanced fashion. In the segment titled "*Pete and Repeat*," the clown in question is sentenced to an eternity of struggle – namely repeating this single joke over and over again: "Pete and Repeat are sitting on a fence, Pete falls off. Who's left? Repeat." Clad in a red wig and a large honking nose, this clown at first glance seems content to tell his joke to the viewer (Fig. 15). Soon, though, the horror of the situation becomes apparent. The clown cannot stop repeating this joke – and he's very much aware of it. His once complacent expression is replaced with visible anguish, as he grits his teeth, pulls at his hair and even tightens his fists.

With the next recital of the joke, the clown's face becomes even more distorted; for a moment seeming as if he's about to cry. He pauses mid-sentence to try gaining composure – but he must finish the joke. His efforts to hold onto sanity are futile, as the clown soon raises his voice with the next joke recital – slowly but surely giving in to the madness that haunts him . . . as *Doo* has already done.



Fig. 15: *Pete and Repeat*, still image from *Clown Torture*, 1987. By Bruce Nauman.

Part Two: Joan Cornella and the Public Smile

Another contemporary artist whose work has impacted me is the Spanish-born cartoonist and illustrator, Joan Cornella Vazquez. Cornella's art consists of hand-painted cartoons and comic strips, depicting smiling characters in the midst of horrific scenarios. After visually dissecting Cornella's work for the past two years, I've come to the realization that both he and I are essentially tackling the same message – the exhumation of humanity's hidden ugliness. During an interview with journalist Christopher Hooton, for art website Vice.com, Cornella states the following:

The process of my work is often based on the idea that humanity can be really disgusting, and I use humor to talk about serious things... to add layers or to take distance on disaster. When I start thinking on a new work it mostly involves a dark view of humankind, but the process is always playful, so it's always fun.

Despite thematic similarities, there are differences between my work and Cornella's. While my mask series thrives under stark Tenebrist lighting, using shadows to unearth textures of ugliness; Cornella uses a bright and cheerful color palette to bring life to his illustrations – evoking the aesthetic of 1950's advertising and airline safety pamphlets (Hooton 1). His characters maintain a blissfully ignorant smile while performing acts that challenge the fabric of modern morale and political correctness.

On the surface, Cornella's work may seem to bear more in common with the darkly comical antics of my Doo character; however, I see various parallels between his visual themes and the nature of my masks that are worth exploring.

In the piece titled *KRUBKAB*, Cornella depicts a man lying on the ground, bleeding from the nose and mouth, after crawling from the wreckage of an automobile accident (Fig. 16).

Despite being gravely injured, the man is sporting a trademark smile – seen as almost a “stamp of approval” throughout all of Cornella’s work. In the foreground, another person’s hand is seen holding a smartphone before the injured man’s face – using the social media app Snap Chat, to superimpose bunny ears and nose with a wagging tongue over the hurt man’s face, making light of his painful predicament.



Fig. 16: *KRUBKAB*, by Joan Cornella. Image courtesy of Joancornella.net.

First and foremost, I interpret the casual smile seen in this piece (and in all of Cornella’s works) to be the most basic mask worn by humans – the “Public Smile.” This is the mask that is designed to promote approachability. It is the mask that is used to hide a person’s innermost feelings. Cornella uses this mask to great satirical effect, as the “Public Smile” remains unfazed even in the most nightmarish of situations – as seen in these additional works (Figs. 17, 18):



Fig. 17: *Extinction*, by Joan Cornella. Image courtesy of [Twitter.com/sirjoancornella](https://twitter.com/sirjoancornella).



Fig. 18: *I'm Good, Thanks* exhibit in London, by Joan Cornella. Image courtesy of [Vice.com](https://www.vice.com).

Whereas I use my masks to give my private shadow a public voice, Cornella's mask serves as a mockery of the very device used to hide the emotions I embrace. I would argue that both my masks and Cornella's "Public Smile" serve the same function – asking the viewer to at least consider what lurks beneath their own exterior visage.

Delving further into the *KRUBKAB* piece, Cornella adds another layer to the "Public Smile" mask. As if this smile wasn't already hiding the anguish felt by the injured man, the passing bystander mocks him further by using the Snap Chat filter. The bunny ears, nose and large, cute tongue collectively work as an additional mask, not only covering up – but rejecting – the remaining element portraying pain, namely the blood oozing from the man's face. The Snap Chat mask has covered all traces of suffering; leaving only a family-friendly, approachable visage, ready to be uploaded to social media – where it can exist among the collective of requisite expectations for contentment.

Part Three: Playing with Toys & The Origin of Doo

Dr. Mary C. Lamia states “Bullies don’t attack confident people. They attack what appears to them as weakness.” I would like to respectfully challenge this notion.

The Doo character was born from a very extensive period of bullying. Not directly from bullying that I suffered, but rather from the bullying that I inflicted – by assuming the role of a bully both vicariously and symbolically through childhood play.

I met my longtime friend (and cohort in bullying) Ricky, during my fifth-grade school year. After realizing that we both shared in common “unsavory” home lives, we quickly became friends. Whereas my father was elderly, and my mother remarried a prison-bound prick, Ricky’s stepfather committed acts such as breaking an egg over his head to assert dominance. Suffice to say, we both experienced our share of respective childhood trauma. Through it all, we needed an outlet. So . . . we played with toys.

Having both grown up as fans of professional wrestling, we entertained ourselves each weekend by putting on our own “action figure wrestling events.” All characters were fair game, with matches drawing from various pop culture sources. One weekend might feature a main event between The Undertaker and Batman, while another evening might see the *Alien* Xenomorph clash with Arnold Schwarzenegger’s *Terminator*.

However, what weren’t fair were the rules we made up. Or more accurately, I should say the lack of rules. Our “Universal Wrestling Federation” (UWF) was a state of complete lawlessness. Every weekend was an exercise in chaotic glee. Ricky and I went so far as to declare ourselves “gods” over our tiny plastic fighters. We dubbed ourselves “The Big Guys.”

This brings me back to Mary Lamia’s earlier claim that “bullies don’t attack confident people.” Through dealing with our childhood hardships, Ricky and I found solace in inflicting

punishment and suffering upon our conglomerate of fictional characters. We were in touch with our Shadows without even realizing it. We embraced our roles as bullies.

And as bullies, we didn't JUST bully the low-tier characters. We aimed high. We targeted our most prolific, popular and confident wrestler – Donatello, of the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*.

Donatello was on top of the world. He was our reigning champion – successfully defending his title against high profile villains such as *Mortal Kombat's* Scorpion and Sub-Zero, and even his own longtime *TMNT* rival, The Shredder. Somewhere along the way, Ricky and I had had enough of the “good guy overcomes all” mantra. In retrospect, perhaps it was because we had difficulty overcoming our own challenges. So, we brought Donatello down a notch... several notches, actually.

After a long string of victories, we pit Donatello against a mentally unhinged robot named Metalhead (Fig. 19). Donatello won the match, but his biggest mistake was when he tried to be a hero. He extended his hand in friendship to the fallen Metalhead, but instead of cordial reciprocation, Donatello received a broken hand for his troubles. This singular moment began Donatello's fall from grace – placing him on the slow, painful path to becoming “Doo.”

From this point on, Metalhead brutalized Donatello every chance he got. He smashed his face with rapid fire punches. He broke Donatello's bones with relentless submission holds. He taunted Donatello in his own cluttered, made-up language, shouting “DUNIDEDCUDIGUNADIE.” (Translation: “*Donnie's dead cause he's gonna die*”) He interfered in Donatello's other matches, causing him to lose time and again. Finally, Metalhead even made fun of Donatello's name. Gradually reducing it to “Donnie” . . . then to “Doonie” . . . then to “Doodie” . . . then “Doo-Doo” . . . and finally . . . “Doo.”

Ricky and I occasionally reflect on our childhood storytelling, questioning why we treated our toys the way we did. Sure, we can fondly reminisce about Metalhead breaking Donatello's spirit and eventually his mind. But as I said to Ricky during a recent phone call: as I dig deeper into the reality of the situation... Metalhead didn't bully Donatello into madness – WE did. We reveled in making the strong become weak. We broke a hero.



Fig. 19: Donatello and Metalhead, by Playmates Toys – *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, 1989 - 1990.

Part Four: Playing with Toys – Videos Carrying the Torch

With the symbolic death of Donatello, a reign of terror soon followed in the years to come. Doo had surpassed Metalhead as the most destructive force in the Universal Wrestling Federation. However, something even more destructive would soon consume the denizens of the UWF – adulthood. Ricky and I grew up. We stopped playing with toys. Over a decade’s worth of stories had concluded.

Refusing to sink quietly into the night, Doo persisted - albeit through different mediums. For instance, Doo made his presence known during phone conversations between Ricky and I. Often hijacking a phone call, Doo would regularly (and desperately) make attempts to garner sympathy – usually resulting in one of us commanding him to “fly away” or “go to the moon.” Yes, it seemed that our inner children were still alive, as we believed that we were actually sending Doo to the moon. However, the imaginary phone calls were not quite enough. I craved something more . . . something tangible . . .

I finally decided to introduce Doo to the real world, by showcasing his antics . . . as a hand puppet. “Puppet Doo” originally began as Ricky’s attempt to antagonize me, having drawn eyes and lips on his hand with a marker (Fig. 20). However, as I began the journey into the realm of video performance art, I needed to up the ante. The rudimentary marker drawing hand puppet needed refinement. After all, not only were these videos an exploration of my shadow and the embrace of madness, but they continued the story of Doo. The videos served as the modern equivalent of playing with toys, becoming the new delivery vehicle for nostalgic storytelling.



Fig. 20: Original “*Puppet Doo*” by Ricky Rossiter

As a modern equivalent of childhood play, it only made sense for Doo to eventually confront one of his own creators (and tormenters) – Ricky.

After committing the atrocity of murdering a young and small pig (Thief), Doo traveled to Florida, and straight into Ricky’s home. Sneaking into the kitchen area, Doo waited for Ricky’s arrival from a job interview – hiding behind the front door.

Hoping to unwind after his interview, Ricky was instead greeted by an ecstatic Doo, who was unable (or unwilling) to control his manic excitement. Ricky accounts the events that followed during that morning:

I felt like I just stepped in – and he (Doo) was in my face . . . he was insubordinate. I thought to myself, this is where I kill it. This is where I kill it. I filled the bowl . . . and I just held it under the water until it stopped... until it just stopped everything.

And just like that, a life was extinguished. Nearly two decades of harassment and agitation had ended. A memorial service was held for Doo on November 14, 2018 at East Tennessee State University. He was promptly laid to rest.

The *Doo Video Series* accomplished for me, exactly what playing with toys did so many years earlier. It allowed me an opportunity to not only acknowledge my inner madness born from my own emotional trauma, but also a means to exercise my imagination. And for the sake of the ongoing story, the videos provided the UWF with one final match: Doo vs. Ricky... No Holds Barred.

CHAPTER 6

GRADUATE THESIS EXHIBITION: *DUNIDEDCUDIGUNADIE*

My graduate thesis show serves a dual purpose: it not only presents the inner monsters that reside within myself, but also asks the viewer to consider the darkness that lurks inside themselves. Between the viewer, and myself, we are both confronted with the shadow archetypes within us. *DUNIDEDGUDIGUNADIE* examines three main works: *Look at You!* (a collective grouping of my masks worn and activated by human figures), *The Nature of Suffering* (a looping video documenting the finality of Doo's life) and *Cooking with Doo Trilogy* (a video that allows me to vicariously attain a long-sought sense of justice). These pieces are accompanied by an auditory element – a continuous version of *Easy Street*, performed by the Collapsible Hearts.

Look at You! is comprised of eight figures that exist within the *DUNIDEDCUDIGUNADIE* exhibit. These figures, or “shadows” are interspersed throughout the gallery space, alternating their positions between standing under spotlights and then retreating into darkness. For audiences to navigate the space, the viewer must walk among these shadows – which may involve confronting them in the process. Some of the shadows are effigies symbolizing my thoughts on people or ideals – such as the Mitch McConnell mask (detailed previously in Chapter 2), the Eagle (representing American pride) and *Pretty # 1* (a manifestation of ugliness that lies behind beauty). Others are abstracted constructions born from my imagination. And finally, some are intended as direct self-portraits. What they share in common is that they are all, essentially, me. They are all born from my social outlook, which has been shaped by the experiences that led me to this point in my life.

The video titled *Cooking with Doo Trilogy* displays both Doo and the Pig Thief in their purest forms: they are scapegoats. These characters carry on the roles that toys and action figures served during my youth. By using these characters as scapegoats, I am allowed to express my anger, hatred and rage in a safe environment, without consequence. I force Doo to suffer hardship while performing a simple task (making a sandwich), while I inflict a greater punishment upon the Pig Thief for his misdeeds (Fig. 21). As referenced earlier, I vicariously act out my need for revenge (and justice) upon the Pig Thief – as this character assumes the role of “The Prick” from my childhood.

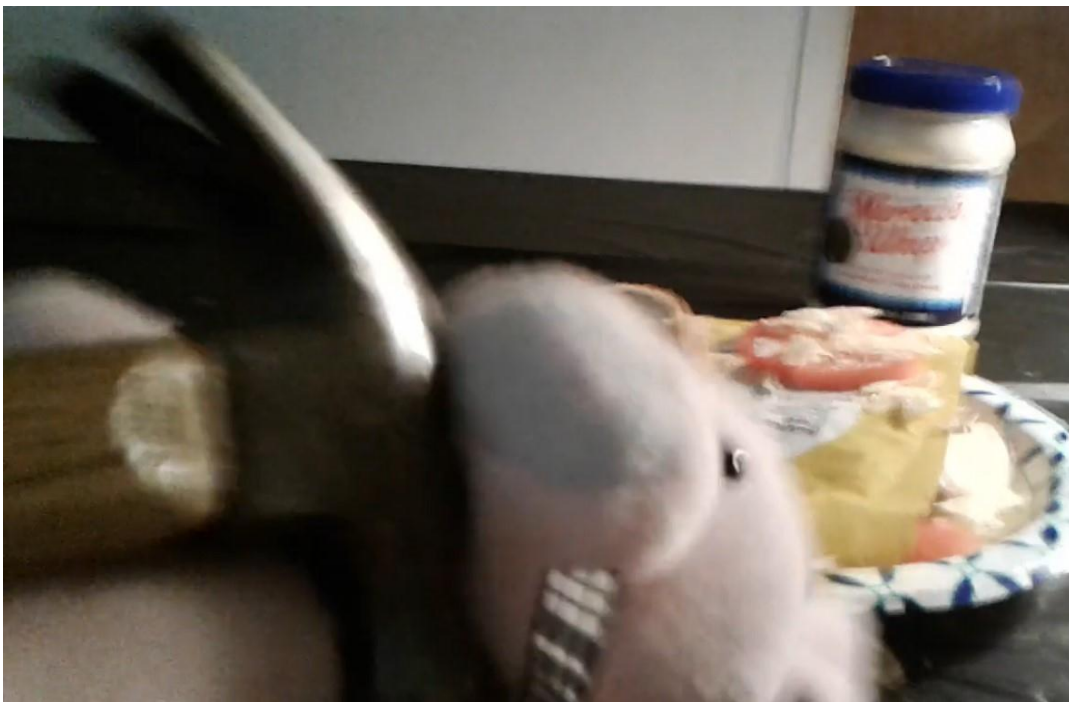


Fig. 21: Still Image from *Cooking with Doo Trilogy*, 2018

The video titled *The Nature of Suffering* exhibits a common theme of suffering: that it usually tends to be repetitive in nature (Fig. 22). The constant looping of this video and consequent repetitive torture and death of Doo (by drowning), reflects yet another act of malice that Ricky and I performed as children. To entertain ourselves, we found ourselves rewinding audiocassette tapes, carefully applying pressure to the tape player buttons to slowly distort voices. In our minds, we were inflicting a degree of pain to a singer or audio book narrator.

Aside from this particular reference – suffering is repetition, and repetition can certainly be suffering. For perhaps a more relatable example, I would draw a comparison to the modern process of dating. I have certainly experienced my share of meeting women, getting to know them and building trust; then realizing that it won't work, and essentially rinsing and repeating. This process for me is very evocative of dunking my head in a tank of water, drowning and slowly resuscitating – only to repeat the process again.

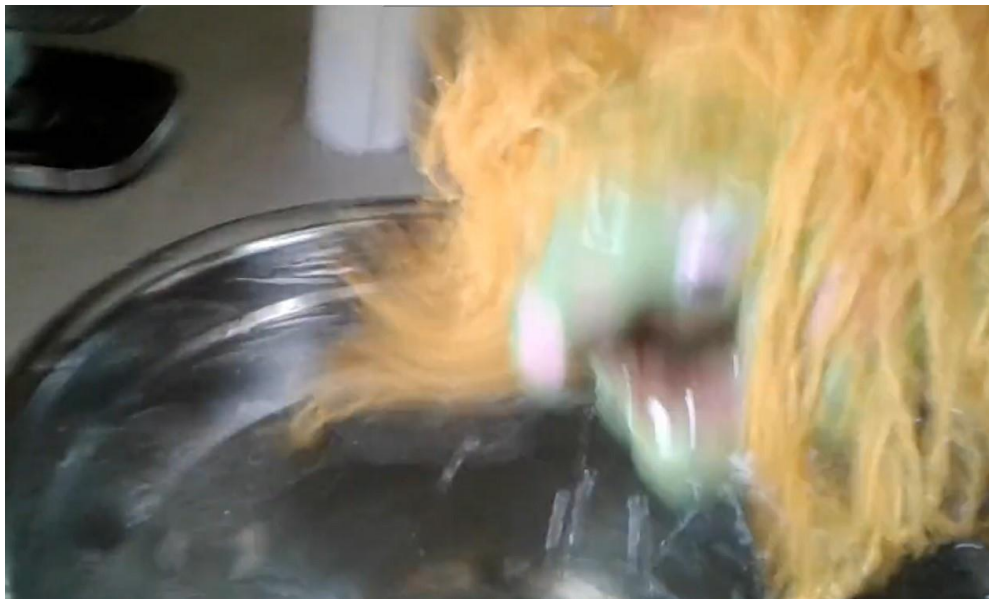


Fig. 22: Still Image from the *The Nature of Suffering*, 2019

Finally, there is the auditory component – *Easy Street* by The Collapsible Hearts. The explanation for the inclusion of this cheery song is simple. I am expected to persevere through my suffering with a positive outlook. Since this show also functions as a symbol of my own mental “safe space,” I use the song as a mockery of the aforementioned societal expectation. I ask the viewer – how long can you maintain a positive outlook through discomfort? How long before the positive outlook betrays you, and the cracks become apparent?

CHAPTER 7

SELF-REFLECTIVE ANALYSIS & CONCLUSION

As my career as a graduate student draws to a close, perhaps the most important thing I reflect upon is whether or not I've grown as an artist and human being from this experience. From the standpoint of artistic technical skill, I can see a clear evolution in the methods by which I craft my work. Making masks from a foundation of cardboard is the last thing I ever expected to get out of graduate school. Before starting my first year, I naively believed that I would simply continue making ink wash drawings... and I tried to do this! Thankfully, I was pushed out of my comfort zone, both by faculty and the mere existence of interdisciplinary courses that encouraged experimentation. The themes of suffering that existed behind the original ink wash drawings paved a way for the suffering of the Doo character to resurface from childhood. The puppetry of Doo, in turn, opened a doorway for more puppet characters, such as the *Talking Mummy Head* and *Harley the Shitting Shi-Tzu* – a puppet based on a dog I once lived with (Figs. 25, 26).

I chose the medium of cardboard for these puppets, first and foremost due to the material's accessibility and economic nature. Secondly, and on a subconscious level, I attribute my choice of the medium to the previously stated need to rebel against the "beauty, cleanliness and order that holds a distinct place amongst the needs of a civilization" (Freud 1). In that respect, I figured cardboard might lend itself to ugliness in a more interesting manner than clay initially could.

Eventually, the idea of masks came into play when I pondered the aftermath of Doo's death in the final episode of my video series, *Richard and Doo Washing Dishes*. How could I honor the weight of the character's demise, while still explore the impact of his legacy?

The very first mask I created was essentially a crude redux of a pre-existing craft mask – I played with forms to create something resembling Doo. This *First Doo Mask* served as experimentation, with the rigid plastic being broken to symbolize the shattered psyche of Doo himself, and then painted with the grotesque clown-like aesthetic of its inspirational source (Fig. 23). Dissatisfied with this piece, I proceeded to sculpt brown craft paper around another plastic craft mask, using the folds and creases to “sculpt” details atop the pre-existing form. This *Face Sculpture* was to be the first in the series of masks constructed from a paper material (Fig. 24).

As time moved forward, and after experimenting with some new cardboard puppet characters; I realized the direction set by the *First Doo Mask* allowed me to come back full circle. I would now re-visit my original body of work – the Ink Wash drawings. However, this time, I would be creating fully wearable expressions of the hatred, sadness and disgust that resided in those drawings.

From a purely technical standpoint, my direction is to continue using cardboard as a substructure; however, I intend for the material itself to be much less apparent on the surface. In this respect, I feel that I have been successful. Compared to the original paper craft *Face Sculpture* and the subsequent cardboard puppets, my recent work more closely simulates textures such as feathers and rotted flesh, as seen in the following documentation of visual progression (see below: Figs. 23 – 34).

In conclusion . . . how exactly does one use art to resolve the inner self with the outer persona? For me, awareness of both sides is the starting point. That awareness translates into knowledge . . . and the knowledge becomes power. With that power comes the ability to survive in a world where basic human needs, such as love and acceptance – are not guaranteed. As an artist, my practice grants me this power to navigate through such hardships. I satisfy the desires

of my Shadow with fictional violence while observing real world consequences – in the process, connecting with other artists who share similar outlooks and humor. It is through art, that I laugh at the chaos of the world.

Documentation of Visual Progression



Fig. 23: *First Doo Mask*, 2018



Fig. 24: *Face Sculpture*, 2018



Fig. 25: *Talking Mummy Head*, 2018



Fig. 26: *Harley the Shitting Shi-Tzu*, 2019



Fig. 27: *Pretty # 1*, 2019



Fig. 28: *Meat*, 2019

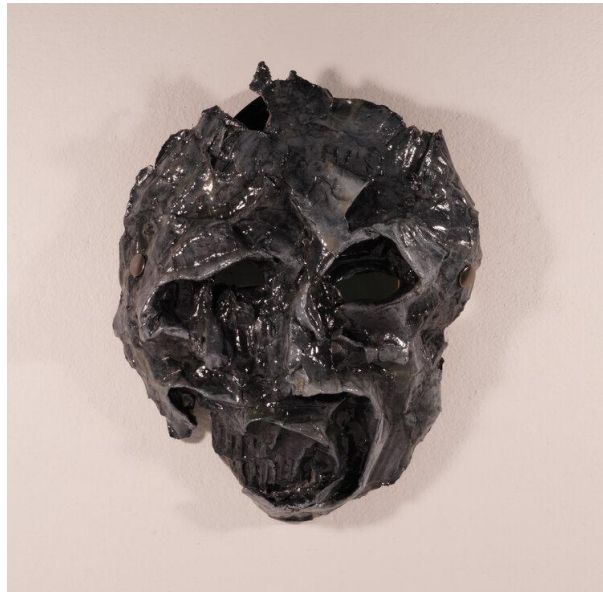


Fig. 29: *Slick*, 2019



Fig. 30: *Ailing*, 2019



Fig. 31: *Endangered*, 2019



Fig. 32: *Power*, 2019



Fig. 33: *Self Portrait # 1*, 2019



Fig. 34: *Self-Portrait # 2*, 2020

CATALOG OF EXHIBITION



Look at You!, 2020

Top Row, from left to right: *Ailing, Endangered, Power*

Bottom Row, from left to right: *Pretty # 1, Self-Portrait # 1, Self-Portrait # 2*

Note: As of the completion of this thesis writing, the exhibition *DUNIDEDCUDIGUNADIE* is canceled, due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The following images were taken during a rehearsal meeting, where the actors wore the masks and prepared for their roles.



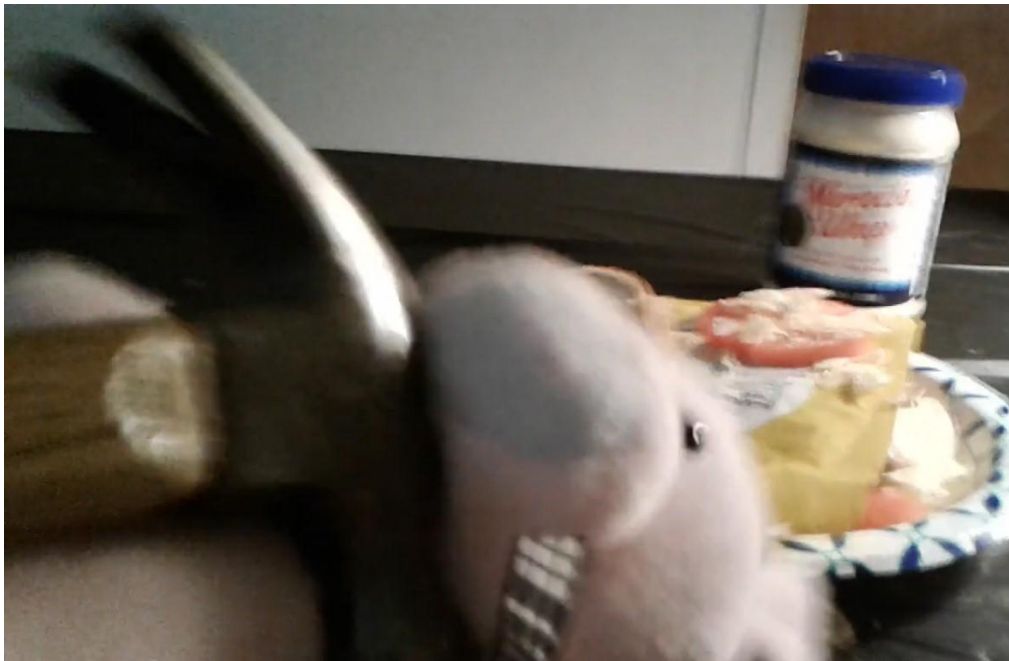
Clockwise from top left: Erin Fitzgerald as *Pretty # 1*, Blythe Lybrand as *Self-Portrait # 1*, and Claire Alfonso as *Pretty # 2* and *Endangered*



Blythe Lybrand as *Self-Portrait # 1* (close up)



Cooking with Doo Trilogy, 2018



Cooking with Doo Trilogy, 2018



The Nature of Suffering, 2018

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VITA

LAWRENCE V. REID

- Education: M.F.A. Studio Art, East Tennessee State University, Johnson
City, Tennessee, 2020
- B.A. Studio Art, University of Central Florida, Orlando, Florida,
2010
- Group Exhibitions: *Laugh Until You Scream: Comedy & Horror Films of East
Tennessee*, Johnson City, TN, 2019
- Kill Your Darlings*, Graduate Student Exhibit, Slocumb Gallery
Johnson City, TN, 2019
- Forms of Violence*, Slocumb Gallery, Johnson City, TN, 2019
- The Face of Danger*, Tipton Gallery, Johnson City, TN, 2019
- Find the Pattern and Break It*, Graduate Student Exhibit,
Reece Museum, Johnson City, TN, 2018
- Volunteering: MASCAP Art Program Jury Member, Momac Art Studio, Johnson
City, TN, 2019
- Johnson City Public Library Comic-Con Jury Member, Johnson
City, TN, 2019
- Awards: Outstanding Graduate Student Award, East Tennessee State
University, Johnson City, TN, 2019