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Stray: Paintings, Drawings, and Sculpture.

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STRAY: DRAWINGS, PAINTINGS, AND SCULPTURE
A BFA EXHIBITION

Thesis presented in partial fulfillment of Honors

By

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Fine and Performing Arts Scholars Program
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ABSTRACT

STRAY

by

Stephanie Streeter

The artist discusses her Bachelor of Fine Arts Exhibition, *Stray*, held at Slocumb Galleries, East Tennessee State University, from April 4th to April 8th. The show exhibit consists largely of self-portraits derived from the artist's dreams, in an array of media including mixed media on paper, oil on canvas, and wire frame sculpture, all completed in the Spring of 2011, with the exception of one sculpture.

Ideas explored include the influence of dreams, representation of the self, masking, disguising, the loss of home, and the tendency of memory to fade. Influences discussed include the written work of Milan Kundera, as well as the painting of Marlene Dumas, the early printmaking of Paul Klee, and the work of John Currin.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you:

To my lovely group of friends: for every bit of encouragement you have given to me and for understanding my absence, even when I have been around.

To my brothers for answering every phone call made at 4 AM.

To Brian: for making sure I was eating every day when I was making my show because you knew I'd forget, for making me laugh when I was getting too serious, and for being the most caring person I've ever known. I don't know if I could have done this without your love.

To my committee: Anita DeAngelis, Mira Gerard, Kathleen Grover, and Scott Contreras-Koterbay. Your invaluable advice, wisdom, and support have given me the confidence to make drawings and paintings and believe that they are worth making.

DEDICATION

For my father.

You may not understand what I do, or even like it, but for all of my ugliness, my many transformations, and my awful stubbornness, you have always supported me and never ceased to believe that I could do what I loved.

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INTRODUCTION

I began this body of work with the intention of creating a series of images that would serve as a documentation of my inner state as it has been while completing my BFA. I wanted to work with intensely personal imagery, using my dreams, memories, and often times images of my own self to form a nonverbal confession. At the same time, it was very important to me that my images, while sentimental and emotional, would retain a large amount of ambiguity. Studying the painting of Marlene Dumas helped me to arrive at this body of work, as well as the early printmaking of Paul Klee, and the paintings of John Currin.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF DOGS

Dogs frequently appear in my dreams as either malevolent beasts, chasing and attacking me, or as calm, ghostly figures, peering out at me from behind corners. The existence of dogs in both these capacities in my mind has occurred since my late teens, but the first appearance of dogs in my work happened in my junior year at ETSU when I was working with collage. I came back to them over and over, placing canine heads on human bodies. I gave little thought to personal significance until I began to become fixated on working with images of dogs and with much reflection began to connect them to my feelings of loss and of absence. Dogs have been present in some way for every major schism or hardship in my life. Their swift disappearance after these events is what I believe continues to pursue me in my dreams and in my work. They are elusive, and taunt me with memories of the companionship that has meant so very much to me, which I now lack.

My parents' divorce occurred simultaneously with my high school graduation and came as a huge shock. In a time when I was very anxious about leaving for college, I was comforted in knowing I had a secure home. The loss of this security, and the discovery that my parents had been planning the divorce for years, was very difficult for me.

I blamed my mother for everything, and I moved in with my father into a small apartment. I felt bitter about my mother's insistence on ownership of our dogs and most of my parents' belongings. I visited her only so I could see Rosie, our border collie, and Buckley, our Weimaraner. When everything around me was strange, uncomfortable, and temporary, I could rely on my dogs to help me feel some level of familiarity. They were the one constant thing I had. My mother secretly gave them away when she decided to move to Atlanta to live with her new boyfriend as soon as I left for college. I came back for a weekend to find them gone. She did this without a word to me or my brothers. I felt betrayed, lost, and without center.

My first year in college was marked with binge drinking, drug abuse, and promiscuity. I was angry and alone. My father moved to New York for a new job, and my mother married again soon after the divorce and settled into her new life in Atlanta. She and her husband adopted another dog, which added to my feelings of abandonment. My brothers were in California. I had never been on my own, and at my 18 years of age, I was intrigued and intoxicated with such freedom. I sought no guidance, and thought very little about my actions. The friends I made were kind, but encouraged me to disregard classes and delve into hedonism. We did everything there was to do, and by the end of my freshman year, I was doing hard drugs on a regular basis. It became easier not to think, but just to move forward with an insane momentum.

I began seeing a 38-year-old man in my sophomore year. His presence was the first comforting thing I'd felt since leaving home. I know now that this relationship was forged because of my need to find a replacement for the security I had lost. I remember him as being sweet and affectionate, but there was always alcohol, very large amounts of alcohol, involved in our meetings. I was seeing him secretly; he was my manager and would have gotten fired if the company had discovered our relationship, which turned out to be the biggest mistake of my life thus far. There were serious consequences as a result of seeing this man, and I still deal with the emotional repercussions. I am left with almost no recollections of our time together or the terrible time following it. The only clear image I have in my mind is a long drive in silence, and an awful, motivational puppy poster hanging directly above my head in a doctor's office.

I have never told my father or mother of this relationship, and still go to great lengths to conceal it from them today. I feel that this is where my theme of masked and draped figures comes from. I am always trying to conceal something in my life and in my work.

I ended the relationship with the man, and he fired me. The whole ordeal, though terrible, really helped me to pull myself together. I met a boy my age, whom I will call Aaron for the sake of anonymity. We made sense together. His father had died when he was 13, and his mother had been estranged from him ever since he had left home to live with his uncle. We both felt lost, and it was comforting to be with someone who understood this instead of merely sympathizing. We moved in together, not because we were madly in love- we never were. I think we both felt obligated to pretend that passion

existed between us, but it was truly necessity that bound us to one another. We were both struggling to pay rent, and it made financial sense.

There were problems from the beginning. Aaron was an extremely angry person, and the relationship became physically and mentally abusive. He was very possessive, jealous, and controlling. I wanted to start figure modeling to earn some extra money, and the suggestion of this infuriated him. It was as if he thought my body belonged to him and him alone. This is why I believe covering figures in my drawings is significant. Through all the arguing, the misery, and the abuse, I did not leave him, as unhappy as we both made each other, because we had two dogs. Our dogs were wonderful, silly, loving friends that filled me with purpose enough to stay in a terrible relationship. They signified home to me, a home I had lost and regained. I needed, desperately needed, to feel that I had a home, and a center. I still feel that way, and am scared it will never happen again. We raised the two dogs from puppies together, a black lab mutt, Susie, and a border collie/ pit bull mix, Guthrie. I took them on long walks everyday, we chased ducks together, and they slept in our bed every night. Eventually, things became bad enough that we finally ended our relationship. He left and I kept the dogs, until one night he broke into the house we had lived in together and where I was finishing our lease. He attacked me, broke everything he could get his hands on, smashed up my car with a crow bar, and took the dogs.

Writing this, I would hate to sound like a battered victim of domestic abuse. I chose to stay with him for two years. I'm not writing this to inspire sympathy, only to give perspective to the work I have made. Like every other thing I have put myself through, I am grateful for that terrible relationship because it has placed me where I am

today and is the reason why I made these images. Aaron, in his heart, is a good, albeit screwed up, person. We had our good times, and I honestly thought that I could help him deal with his anger. I knew what it was like to feel the loss of home and the confusion it creates. We were the same in so many ways, and I couldn't resist trying to fix someone else's problems. It was easier than facing my own.

A few weeks after the break-in, Aaron left the dogs tied to my porch. I was so happy to have them back, but my joy was swiftly replaced with anxiety. The house I was renting was sold by the owner, and they gave me a month to move out. I was already struggling to get by with the rent, and with the addition of both my dogs, there was no way I could afford their vet bills, food, and medication. I couldn't find an apartment that would allow two large dogs on my budget. I had no choice but to give them up. Susie and Guthrie both went to good homes, but the day I gave them to their new owners still plagues me. I miss them terribly to this day and I often think of them. When I dream of dogs attacking me, it is often them. Because I lost those two in such a way, I have promised to myself I will never again adopt a dog until I am positive that I am financially stable enough to ensure a home for us. When I own a dog again, it will be when I find home, and center, and peace.

It feels almost silly to admit to so much distress over the loss of animals, but their absence in my life solidified the realization that nothing is certain. Dogs have become a symbol of the dissolution of my parents' marriage, the loss of home and the failure of a trying to make a new home with another person. Throughout my five years at college, I have consistently looked for comfort in places where I could only find distraction.

Dogs haunt my dreams and fascinate me in my paintings and drawings. I can secretly inject my life and experiences into those images and still keep such a distance from revealing anything. When I disguise a human face with a canine mask, I feel that I am allowing my shame and regret to surface, to take shape and hint at my past, but just enough to obscure the individual in the painting. I hope the thin balance of confrontation and disguise in my work is what comes through, rather than any comprehensible personal narrative. Marlene Dumas, whom I love and have tried to emulate in my large figure drawings, Monuments of Fear and Regret, said about her work in an interview with Barbara Bloom:

It suggests all sorts of narratives, but it doesn't really tell you what's going on at all. Someone said that it feels as if something has happened, in the sense of an after-event, or alternatively that something's going to happen but you don't yet know what it is. It's as if I can make people think they are so close to me that they believe I've addressed the painting directly to them. I give them a false sense of intimacy. I think the work invites you to have a conversation with it. (Bloom 151)

This is what I hope to accomplish in this body of work; to suggest an inner state rather than use any specific details and engage the viewers in an intimate way, as if they are gaining access to my thoughts.

MOMUMENTS OF FEAR AND REGRET

The grouping of the five life-size figure drawings was one of the last things I executed, and the most frustrating. I am not accustomed to working large, and that was the main reason I decided to do it. I think my inexperience working in this scale really

was an advantage in the end; the drawings turned out to be very strange, awkward images. Marlene Dumas' The Painter, 1994, was the image that really inspired the aesthetic of this grouping. I wanted to achieve a washy, textured, gestural look. I also wanted to use the vertical, column-like positioning of the figure in a non-specific environment.



Marlene Dumas
The Painter
1994



Hollow Shell
Mixed media on paper
2011

Although visually my work is more sculptural, I still think my love of Dumas comes through. Hollow Shell was the first one I did of the series, and it is largely based on Dumas' palette in The Painter. The gaze is also very similar, with the darkened eyes.

I view Monuments of Fear and Regret all as self-portraits of sorts, but Hollow Shell is the only one that I used my own body for. I took the reference picture in The Pit, the student studio spaces in the basement of Brooks Gym. It was early in the afternoon, when any other student could have walked in. I have done this before when taking nude or semi-nude reference photos of myself. The fact that I may have to rush to cover myself gives the source image more energy. It is also significant because the ideas of covering and disguising are so prevalent in my work.

The importance of Dumas' painting to me comes from the very striking, often aggressive gazes she brings out in all her subjects. What makes the gazes so entrancing is that while they are so powerful, they are also vacant, and it becomes clear that the person depicted is not a person, but a representation of something more. Dumas uses the body as a vessel to discuss isolation, and also the relationship between image, painter, and audience. Mary Rose Hendrikse writes about The Painter in her article *Beyond Possession: Marlene Dumas and the Mobilization of Subject, Paint and Meaning*, "The Painter's hands seem at once to suggest power and powerlessness, raw agency and limp passivity. The former is expressed through colour and the latter through the flaccid, indeterminate shape of the hands, suggesting the chance effect of stains rather than the willed modeling of brushstrokes... The life-size scale, the confrontational placement of the figure, the scrutinizing eyes and the ambiguous play between surface and form all suggest the possibility of The Painter being read as a mirror reflection." (Hendrikse)

I wanted Monuments of Fear and Regret to become more than reproductive drawings of the figure, or portraits. I wanted them to be vessels into which I could pour my memories of mistakes made. When approaching each of the five drawings, I focused on one particular memory. This is why the palette and mark-making slightly differ from piece to piece.



Monuments of Fear and Regret

(From left to right) Angry Fix, Futile Cover, Hollow Shell, Come Hither, In Heat

Mixed media on paper

2011

This grouping was an incredible learning experience. I began to notice that when working on these all at once, the impact of each individual piece changed drastically when I would reposition them. I also found that working on multiple pieces at once, bringing them all to a state of finish together was very beneficial. I used numerous wet and dry media to execute these. I began with a graphite contour drawing from my reference photo. I did very minimal proportional measurements, as I wanted to bring out an awkwardness of the body. Certain areas of the anatomy were exaggerated, especially the feet, hands, and breasts of the female figures. After the graphite rendering, I would

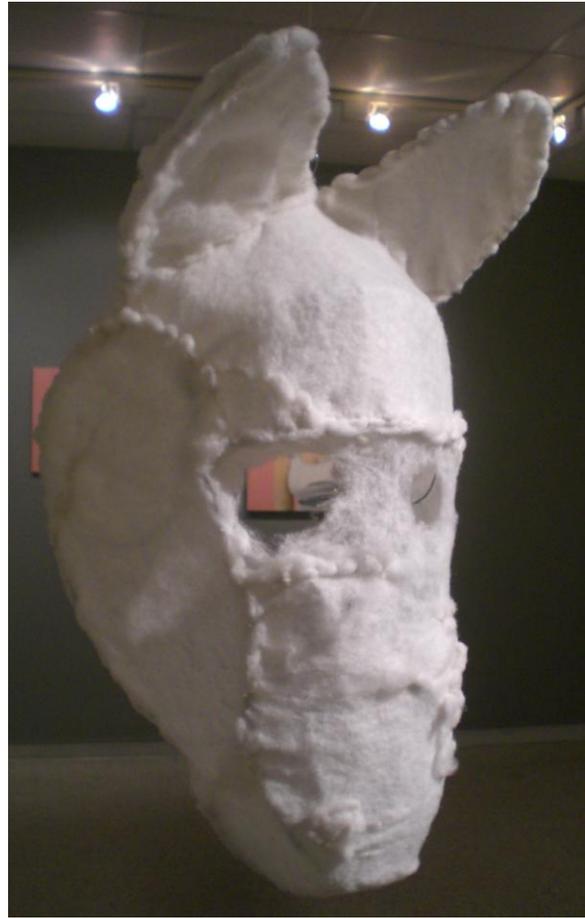
quickly lay in loose areas of color with chalk pastel, and rapidly work back in, spreading the color with water and gesso. I would also layer acrylic and watercolor with matte medium. I would work so quickly that I would lose a great amount of detail, which provided me with interesting, spontaneous texture. I would do two or three layers of this, and then work to bring the contour and detail back out. Working in this way was completely foreign to me, and made me extremely nervous. In fact, I was terrified the majority of the time working on this grouping. Not only was I focusing my thoughts on a painful memory, forcing myself to relive mistakes, but I was working completely out of my comfort zone.

THE DREAM MASKS

I made the first Dream Mask in the fall of 2010. The semester prior to that, the performance artist Lilly McElroy came as a visiting artist. In her critique of my work, which at the time consisted of drawings made from collaged images of human-dog hybrid figures, she remarked that the figures would be more interesting if they were wearing dog masks instead of having actual dog heads. The remark stuck with me, and after several dreams in which I would watch myself turn into a hound, I decided that making a dog mask would be an important step. The actual execution of these, while time-consuming, is incredibly simple. I learned how to construct wire-frame sculptures in 3-D design, and applied the exact same principles to the Dream Masks.



Dream Mask II
Wire and handmade paper
2011



Twin II
Wire and cotton batting
2011

The covering of the masks proved to be more difficult. I went through four failed experimentations before finding several materials that worked. Dream Mask II involved dipping the fragile cotton paper into a mixture of glue and water, and draping segments over the wire quickly, securing them with pins until the paper dried. The Twin Masks are the most successful and attractive. The cotton batting is extremely pliable, and has a lovely, soft texture. The ability of the material to break apart and become extremely thin made it easy to manipulate.

I made the masks because I am interested in attempting to physically resemble the dogs that I sometimes become in my dreams, and represent myself as in my paintings and drawings. Milan Kundera writes about the interactions between dogs and humans in his novel, The Unbearable Lightness of Being, from which I have taken much inspiration. The character of Karenin, the dog of the main characters Tomas and Tereza, is in many ways the cornerstone of their dysfunctional, distrustful relationship. Kundera writes, “Karenin was the timepiece of their lives. In periods of despair, [Tereza] would remind herself she had to hold on because of him, because he was weaker than she” (Kundera 74). I relate Karenin to the dogs I once owned and stayed in a bad relationship for. Both Tomas and Teresa need Karenin to complete and fill in the empty, terrifying void in their love for one another. Karenin is very averse to change. When Teresa moves him from Prague to Austria and back again, Karenin paces the apartment and becomes distraught over the absence of his usual routine. Kundera writes of a Karenin’s perception of time, Karenin hated change. Dog time cannot be plotted along a straight line; it does not move on and on, from one thing to the next. It moves in a circle like the hands of a clock, which- they, too, unwilling to dash madly ahead- turn round and round the face, day in and day out following the same path. (Kundera 74)

I was struck by this passage because it so closely resembles my perception of time when I dream of becoming a dog. Events and images circle over and over, and I never move forward, but stay suspended, watching.

In reading this book, I tried to place myself in the role of one of the characters; I tried to decide if I was Tereza, the woman who loves Tomas so fiercely, receiving no assurance of love from him and dreaming vividly, or if I was Tomas, the man entranced

with the beauty of life and of sex and power. I wanted to be Sabina, the painter, naked in a Magritte bowler hat. I knew though, that I, more than anything, am the dog Karenin, who watches silently, loves her happy routine, and is terribly upset when her home is taken from her.

THE CONFLICT PORTRAITS

My first painting of the Spring 2011 semester was the beginning of this series, which also started the chain reaction that led to this body of work. I had been thinking about this image when I began to execute it for over six months. It happened one night when I had been drinking with friends, and had started having serious doubts about the relationship I was in with a fellow artist. I was standing in my bathroom, looking at myself in the mirror, and I was horrified. I could not recognize myself. The longer I stared, the more alien my face seemed. I started imagining that I was wearing a removable mask, that behind it lay my real face, which would be comforting and familiar.



Conflict Portraits
Oil on canvas and paper
2011

When I finally began this series of small paintings, I did not yet have the desire to work from my body and face. I had been collecting source material from magazines, screen stills, and the internet for quite some time (following in the example of Marlene Dumas, who keeps an extensive collection of images) and decided to use police mug shots as references to build these paintings upon. I liked using the mug shots because I had no emotional investment in the model, and could manipulate them freely without becoming fixated on an identity. Rather, I really tried to create cold, unsettling images to reconstruct the feeling of non-recognition I felt that night, and several nights since. I also enjoy working from mug shots because the expressions of the criminals are either violently aggressive or completely glazed over. I was thinking about Dumas' Models series from 1994 when I was making these. Dumas made 100 watercolor paintings of ghostly faces, taken from actual magazine models, as well as from pictures of close friends. Each painting, strange as it may be, becomes stronger as part of the collective.

THE SELF PORTRAITS IN PINK



Self Portrait in a Thin Disguise
Oil on Canvas
2011



Self Portrait, Trying to Hide
Oil on Canvas
2011



Self Portrait as Twin II
Oil on Canvas
2011



Self Portrait as Twin I
Oil on Canvas
2011

This grouping of paintings was not planned in my original conception of the show. When I began the first one, Self Portrait in a Thin Disguise, it was really out of a strong desire to make an oil painting utilizing what I learned in taking an Old Masters Painting Techniques class and expand the array of visual styles in my show. I also wanted to create a strange image by subtly exaggerating the anatomy. In both Self Portrait in a Thin Disguise and Self Portrait, Trying to Hide, I elongated the neck, enlarged the breasts, and made the eyes slightly larger. I have always admired John Currin, and realized after finishing both paintings that I was obviously influenced by him. I have a print of The Pink Tree hanging right above my painting station in my studio; the palette and especially the pink color featured in Currin's tree must have had a subconscious effect on this grouping of paintings.



John Currin
The Pink Tree
Oil on Linen
1999

Currin's work engages in a conversation with the tradition of figurative painting. He references Renaissance painting, while breaking the rules of proportion. He takes the Baroque style and pushes it even farther into decadence. I am drawn to Currin for the same reasons I am drawn to Dumas; he takes his subjects completely out of context. The imagery he presents us with is indicative of a narrative, but no such story exists. Instead of a narrative, we are given a suggestion, and because this the image is left open-ended the viewer has the ability to question what is presented.

The compositions of the pink Self-Portraits were meant to act as mirror reflections. I wanted the gazes to be self reflective, rather than making a direct connection with the viewer. The Self Portraits as Twin I and II were done in response to the first two paintings. They are important in that they provide juxtaposition of human and dog, while still being cohesively tied together. I attempted to inject as much human expression into the dog as possible and make their faces engaging, to heighten the more blank, vacant faces of the human portraits. If I could sum up this grouping of paintings, I would say that the human portraits are images of me looking at myself, and the dog portraits are images of me as I perceive my inner state to be.

FEVER DREAMS

The graphite drawings were the most direct translations from my dreams to paper. I have a reoccurring dream in which I am covered in a blanket. I keep digging through the layers of the blanket to find the surface, but instead find dogs. The dogs attach themselves to me, weighing me down so that I eventually can no longer move. The

dreams are oddly calming, and overwhelmingly white, which is what I tried to capture in these drawings.



Fever Dream, or Carrying the Twins
Graphite on printmaking paper
2011



Enticement
Graphite on Arches
2011

I borrowed the delicate, detailed line work from the early etchings of Paul Klee. I saw the Inventions series when I was in San Francisco in the summer of 2010, and they made a huge impression on me. I was struck by the surreal quality of his images and Klee's decision to edit the image down to the most essential form by leaving the subject in a white, ambiguous space. While Klee's images are much more bizarre, I think that the connection is evident in the textures I brought out in my drawings.



Paul Klee
Virgin in the Tree
Etching
1903

detail

CONCLUSION

In setting out to make this body of work, I had the expectation that upon completion, I would be filled with a sense of accomplishment, fulfillment, and peace. Having reached that point and taken my work off the gallery walls, I am no more content than I was when I began. I know this is because my work will never be finished. I will continue to be intrigued and haunted by beautiful dreams, attempt to chase down their meanings (if a meaning does exist), and document it all in image-making. My intention is to allow this body of work to serve as a preservation of my time here at ETSU. I expect that dogs will always appear in my work, as I will always be searching for a lost home, but I want to push past the imagery I have created here, and develop more complex paintings.

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