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Float In Float Out

Jason Sabbides

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Float In Float Out

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
Masters of Fine Arts of StudioArt

by
Jason Sabbides
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Mira Gerard, Chair
Ralph Slatton
Travis Graves

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ABSTRACT

Float In Float Out

by

Jason Sabbides

The artist discusses *Float In Float Out*, his Master of Fine Arts exhibition held at The Slocumb Gallery, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee from March 19, 2012, to March 23, 2012. The work consists of paintings on canvas, panel, and paper and employs a variety of media ranging from traditional materials to spray paint. The painting sizes vary from 20x24 inches up to 48x96 inches and all hang directly on the wall, framed and unframed.

Topics discussed in this thesis paper include the influences of the artist’s military experience and travelling abroad as well as the influences of alchemy, Freemasonry, and Surrealism. The work is inspired by the concept of a parallel dimension populated by unseen creatures that float in and out of our world.

Included are images of the artist's earlier work as well as a completed catalogue of the *Float In Float Out* exhibition.
DEDICATION

This exhibition is dedicated to my wife Jessica Sabbides and my son Casper B. Sabbides. Thank you for dealing with me during this long road, I am grateful for your patience and understanding.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my committee, Mira Gerard, Ralph Slatton, and Travis Graves. Thanks to every mentor I had along the way. Thanks to David Hamburgers. Thanks to all of my friends and family for your support. Thanks to the Polka Glocks. Thanks to Joseph and Amber Delahanty for your help during the show.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Ever since I was a young boy, I could see things I couldn't explain within larger forms. Clouds, rocks, spills, wood grain, and patterns in nature, these all became an imaginative playground for my mind where I could warp and twist the ordinary into strange biomorphic entities. These transmuted objects of ordinary life became fodder for phantasmagoric mental excursions. These early memories became very important to me as I began my MFA thesis work. The current MFA work still uses these imaginative techniques that I used as a child.

The work in my thesis exhibition synthesizes influences ranging from my military experience and travelling abroad to alchemy, Freemasonry, and Surrealism. Float In Float Out involves a parallel dimension populated by unseen creatures that float in and out of our world. The creatures either exist in a vacuous world devoid of any spatial reference or are literally floating into the space as shaped wall pieces with protruding mechanical gears. Some of the pieces emphasize the flatness of the picture plane and others are 3-dimensional wall entities that intrude upon our reality.

The vacuous worlds in which these entities exist reflect my struggle with my transition from the military into civilian life. These lone entities are as isolated and alien as I felt trying to cope with academic life and the life of an artist. I fantasized that I lived vicariously through them, because they are self-contained flying machines, able to move and transition through time and space without much effort. I used elements of chance and randomness inspired by Surrealist practices such as automatic drawing and Max Ernst's Grottage and Frottage paintings. The work in this exhibition began with either an ink smear or a blob of oil paint, and I responded to them with imposed fantastical imagery until they took shape as specific creature/machines. I used the
concept of alchemical transformation/transmutation as a philosophy for painting; I imagined they were conjured into existence, not merely painted into being.
CHAPTER 2

THE BEGINNING

The kinds of art that I did as a child and during high school mainly consisted of internal imaginative excursions of the mind. My imagination as a child was incredibly active; I looked at things like ink stains and clouds only to really see fantastic creatures of otherworldly proportions. This imagery was a constant for me, my friends and family constantly observed me staring at stains, patterns, cloud forms, rock formations, and the dense foliage of the woods and wondered what I was doing. Even in the Army, I just stared off into space for long periods of time and let my imagination morph my surroundings into objects and creatures.

This was a constant for me, and I didn't realize then that I could reproduce these internal formations into tangible pieces of work through my creative talents. I held within the fact that my everyday landscape contained much more than what everyone around me witnessed. After high school graduation in 1994, I joined the U.S. Army for six years. This period of time in the military had a major influence on and in my art work.

When I was discharged from the military, I went back to school. In 2004, I enrolled in a beginning drawing course at Western Piedmont Community College. This was my primary reason for joining the Armed Services. I had originally pursued a special education degree with a focus on severely disabled individuals. Under this core curriculum of study, I scheduled a course called art appreciation with Professor Mark Poteat. This course changed my life; I knew about Vincent Van Gogh and Leonardo da Vinci, yet, I had never really spent any time to look within their work. This course opened my eyes to a different level of understanding and appreciation of visual stimulation. The inner creative mechanisms of a brush stroke, a pen mark,
or the application of chisel and hammer were unknown to me. A new form of beauty had taken place in my world, the beauty of art and the creative ingenuity of the human being. I couldn't begin to fathom how an individual could produce such wonderful creations. In my life up to this point, I never stopped long enough to gaze at a piece of art. I was consumed by the world around me but now the world of art began to take its place.

To find one's path in life has always been a very important theme for me. Even at a very young age, I asked again and again to the universe, to the unknown, what was my purpose here, why do I exist, why was I born? I contemplated these questions so many times as a young man. Professor Poteat explored a vast amount of art from many different periods of time including: Leonardo da Vinci, Hieronymus Bosch, Salvador Dali, Max Ernst, Pablo Picasso, Vincent Van Gogh, and Eugene Delacroix. These artists continue to influence my work through today. I referred to many of their works for color choices or rendering and drawing material.
After I completed the art appreciation course I enrolled in a drawing fundamentals course as well as a beginning painting course; examples of my work from this class can be seen in "Fig. 1, *The Wanderer*, 2004, conte crayon." These classes were not strict or well defined, and I had a huge amount of artistic freedom. I was interested, even then, in strange curvilinear forms, distortion of known reality, surrealism, and the biomorphism associated with it. Interesting enough, I see the same shapes and distorted realities in my present work eight years later. When I juxtaposed these two pieces with a more current piece, "Fig. 2, *Into The Wild*, 2010, oil on panel," I saw similar shapes and themes permeating throughout. The attention to detail and the love of refined surfaces and forms have always been a part of my work from the very beginning.
Fig. 2. *Into the Wild*, 2010, oil on panel.

After Western Piedmont Community College I transferred to the University of North Carolina at Asheville and was pleased to have studied under such great practicing artists as Robert Dunning who worked in printmaking and mixed media painting, Robert Tynes a Trompe l'oeil master, and Virginia Derryberry an amazing figurative and narrative painter. Examples of the work I produced during this period include, "Fig. 3, *A Study of Light and Bones*, 2005, oil on
canvas." I was intensely focused on being able to paint exactly what was there. I wanted to perfect my hand-eye coordination in order to breakdown color schemes.

During my senior thesis I applied for an Undergraduate research grant of $5,000 and received the award.

My undergraduate research explored old master painting materials and techniques. I also compared them with modern day materials.

Fig. 3. *A Study of Light and Bones*, 2005, oil on canvas.
An example of the work produced can be seen in "Fig. 4, The Story of The Glogie, 2008, oil on a golden ration oak panel," and "Fig. 5, The Octopus Wranglers, 2008, oil on linen." These pieces accompanied my senior exit show, and I published a paper with the National Conference of Undergraduate Research. Through the grant I was contracted to present my findings during my senior exit show that consisted of thirty-two paintings and drawings, for the NCUR symposium 2008 at the University of La Crosse in Wisconsin.

Fig. 4. The Story of the Glogie, 2008, oil on a golden ration oak panel
This proved to be an invaluable experience for numerous reasons. Through the grant, I purchased a considerable amount of supplies that would have been otherwise unattainable. I studied a wide gamut of mediums on the market, and compared modern materials with old masters materials. I gained knowledge on contemporary materials, as well as European Old Master materials and techniques, over a year of intense study.

Fig. 5. *The Octopus Wranglers*, 2008, oil on linen.

The imagery in the above mentioned pieces were the front runners of my undergraduate show and were based on the creation a new world. This world blended new and old world mythology mixed with a bit of insanity and fantasy. I created machines and characters to pilot them, and in some cases, paintings were just about the characters themselves. The main focus fabricated a contextual landscape filled with all of the mythology from our world into one
amalgamated form. Each piece represented a snapshot of a day in the life of that character or machine. This work naturally led me into my graduate work and is evident in "Fig. 6, Cloud Propellant, 2010, mixed media." This piece began with the idea of flattening the landscape and yet at the same time implying space. To do this, I laid architecture blueprints on top of a panel and also literally cut deep into the panel to create a recessed area. This flattened space and then recessed space was also mixed with a highly volumetric form that conveyed depth. Instead of atmosphere and actual spatial depth, the surrounding space was filled with diagrams and patterns. My new world that I created is not subjected to the same norms of physical reality that was imposed upon it in previous work. This was a huge step for me, I usually had the notion that I had to conform to physical space in order to create the illusion of depth and convey the sense of reality. This wasn't the case because it was
literally a fabricated plane of existence where my new creatures existed. It didn't have to conform to any notions of physical reality that belonged to this world. This was the concept for the entire show, the idea of alternate realities and space, where creatures existed, but could simultaneously jump into our world. Multi-dimensional beings, who lived and existed in an indefinable space and yet could float into our space; hence the title of the show, "Float In Float Out."

*Cloud Propellant* floated out of our world and into the parallel dimension filled with blueprints and diagrams that I couldn't see. I inferred that some viewers would have trouble grasping this concept and devised an immediate relationship to this world again; a recessed area cut into the panel drawing. This brought attention once again to the surface and our realm, which allows the viewer a mental resting area. The actual subject matter of this piece was a cloud machine that visited our world and had decided to fabricate clouds in the diagram world because it thought they were pretty. I used old master techniques of slow glazing that I had learned during my undergraduate research grant to produce form. This piece became the evolution of my more mature undergraduate course work.

I graduated with high honors as an undergraduate research scholar from the University of North Carolina at Asheville in 2008. During my senior exit show, I applied to a variety of master programs in order to further my knowledge of art. I was accepted into the East Tennessee State University MFA program with a concentration in painting in 2009.
CHAPTER 3

THE PIVOTAL PIECE

One crucial painting changed the entire direction of my work, "Fig. 7, Into the Center, 2010, mixed media." I began this piece by starting with a still life. The still life was a model, that I created by taking a stuffed animal and gluing it to the top of a model tank. I set up the lighting and the positioning very specifically. After I prepped my panel board with rabbit skin glue, I gave it a monochromatic under-glaze of steel gray. I completed my preparatory

Fig. 7. Into the Center, 2010, mixed media.

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drawing of the still life upon the panel, a process I have done many times in the past. I glazed a
sealing layer of lead white over the drawing so the first sketch didn't push up through the paint
layers. This formed a lock on the drawing underneath. I mixed my paints, began a concentrated
stare at my still life, and began to paint. I made it through the first layers of local color and
simply stopped. I stared at that still life for what seemed like an eternity, put my brushes away,
and left the studio.

The next morning I returned and hoped I would see it finished but it wasn't. I stared at
that unfinished painting and the still life for hours, I never moved. I realized that I was mentally
bored with my creation simply because I created it. I knew I could paint it in all its detail, I
knew what had to be done and what colors to mix, but I didn't move. I just stood, stared, and
pondered, why? Why am I doing something or going through the motions if my heart isn't in it.
I am a 100% or nothing kind of person. If I wasn't going to give this painting the justice of my
full attention and mental capabilities then I shouldn't be working on it! I calmly decided to
destroy it. I immediately grabbed some sand paper and began erasing the image. In the midst of
my sanding process, I noticed that this new, sanded image held an entirely different painting
within it.

Leonardo da Vinci stated in his notebooks:

> When you look at a wall spotted with stains, or with a mixture of stones, if you
> have to devise some scene, you may discover a resemblance to various
> landscapes, beautified with mountains, rivers, rocks, trees, plains, wide valleys
> and hills in varied arrangement: or again you may see battles and figures in
> action; or strange faces, and costumes, and an endless variety of objects, which
you could reduce to complete and well drawn forms. And these appear on such walls confusedly, like the sound of bells in whose jangle you may find any name or word you choose to imagine. (Suh 37)

I did exactly what Leonardo spoke of; through my imagination I saw new worlds within the normal and mundane. This exciting revelation lead me to this conclusion: I could begin any painting with a predetermined concept but in the end I had to surrender to the painting's wishes. My heart was not in the piece; I sat my brushes down, reset my mind, breathed, and meditated on the piece. What was in front of me and what I saw wasn't what is truly there. That practice of looking within to observe the outside world was a practice that stemmed from my childhood.
The occult, magic, and the esoteric have always been a part of my life. I was very interested in Wicca and the supernatural when I was a child, and as I progressed into adulthood my fascination grew. My first roommate in the U.S. Army was a member of the Hermetic order of the Golden Dawn and introduced me to the likes of Aleister Crowley, Dr. Robert Anton Wilson, W.B. Yeats, Freemasonry, The Illuminati, and The Rosicrucian order. My interest was piqued so I started to investigate the origins and practices of these groups. Many documents I researched were written by the authors mentioned above; my focus became increasingly concentrated in Albert Pike. Albert Pike is a Scottish Rite Freemason and I read his book, *Morals and Dogma: Ancient and Accepted Rite*. I didn't understand much of it because it alluded to degrees within Freemasonry, so I just put it aside. In 2002, it became evident that the more answers I found lead to more questions and this became a vicious circle.

What interested me the most from Albert Pike's 900 page volume was his discussions on Alchemy:

Like all the Mysteries of Magism, the Secrets of "the Great Work" have a threelfold signification; they are religious, philosophical, and natural. The philosophical gold, in religion, is Absolute and Supreme Reason: in philosophy, it is the Truth; in visible nature, the Sun; in the subterranean and mineral world, the most perfect and pure gold. It is for this that the pursuit of the Great Work is called the Search for the Absolute; and the work itself, the work of Sun. (Pike 773)
I asked questions within myself about what this great work was and what its philosophy was. My interest in the symbols and philosophy of Alchemy wasn't piqued until I became an artist. I was by no means the first artist to have taken an interest in Alchemy. Andre Breton spoke of it in his second surrealist manifesto, and Max Ernst’s collages, frottage, paintings, and drawings are riddled with Alchemical symbols. (Warlick 1) If observers can see past the arcane symbols and look at the basic philosophy behind it, they can see why it is such an interest for so many artists.

Alchemy’s basic idea, according to the book *Alchemy: Ancient and Modern*, by H. Stanley Redgrove, was the transmutation of lead into gold by the use of the mysterious philosopher’s stone. Alchemy was a dual philosophy, not only was it about the physical plane, but also the mystical. Turning lead into gold, in truth, symbolizes the transmutation of Man from evil to pure. Alchemists also “aimed at...discovering a universal medicine” called the panacea. (Redgrove 2) This philosopher’s stone “was to serve to tincture or transmute the base metals or its mercury (mercury another name for soul) to silver or gold. “It had the power to make the base metal that was sick, well (precious). Here came the idea of a universal medicine called the panacea. Alchemy desired indeed to produce in the philosopher's stone a panacea that should free mankind of all sufferings and disease to make men young again.” (Silberer 114) When I looked at the ideas of transmutation in Alchemy, I could see how Alchemical philosophy was designed to transfigure the human soul and how it was paralleled with painting. This was the basic concept of painting: to transmute not only the materials at hand into alchemical gold but as an outlet to transmute the viewer and the painter. When I, the painter, began to make art, I took tons of frustration, ideas, emotion, and pent up energy and transmuted them from a negative or earthly realm into a higher state of existence. I took the earthly terrestrial pigments and ideas
and began to transform them into a heavenly entity. All of my paintings for this Masters of Fine Art exhibition are about these ideas.

They are entities that existed in an ethereal atmosphere, floating or flying above the earth, above terrestrial existence and the thoughts that coexist with it. Whatever paradigms, ideals, wants, and desires that exist here on earth stay here. My creatures and/or entities are above and beyond the earth. They do not want for food, sex, greed, or any vices that exist within this human life. They float above it all in a ethereal space high in the heavens or maybe between parallel dimensions, with one foot in this world and one foot in another at the same time. My drawing of one such creature is called, "Fig. 8, Netherlander, 2010, mixed media on paper," where I literally transmuted myself, my materials, and the viewer using an alchemical process.
James Elkins stated in his book, *What Painting is*, “In Alchemy, distillation is when the substance gives up its mundane body and becomes spirit, and in painting, it is when the paint ceases to be paint and turns into colored light.” (Elkins 125) This is the essence of my work, the act of uplifting the mundane into a higher spiritual state. It was this idea of distillation and transmutation and various symbolism that is attributed to Alchemy that I use holistically in the studio, and in the gallery. The processes that lead up to creating this drawing are pure
alchemical painting. I started with a light ink blot of walnut and smeared it around; I cared not for the form. I repeated this process over and over and slowly refined the form as I went. When I reached a certain point of walnut ink washes, I started to see a creature within. At this point, I stopped using the ink washes and took a fixative spray and covered the ink stain because it was water-soluble and easily smudged. Now began the process of working from the general to the specific. This was much the same way that Max Ernst worked his Grottage, *La Horde*, 1927, (Fig. 9) where he painted out figures and creatures that he saw in scraped paint.

Fig. 9. Max Ernst, *La Horde*, 1927. Image courtesy of Malingue SA @ADAGP Paris 2008.
I worked with layered ink stains that created a similar affect. I outlined and defined areas of the stain in which there was definite form with micron pens and India ink. Next I used gouache that brought life and color to the object with biomorphic shapes that resembled candy wings and bulbous liquid excretions. The forms took on a resemblance to Dr. Seuss’s architecture and imagery, (Fig. 10). At the same time that I worked these forms, I spread walnut ink back over areas in order to make it all more homogenous and whole. The blob of walnut ink was then transmuted into a specific entity with design and purpose by working from the general to the specific. Layer after layer, I refined and distilled until the form gave up its raw state and transmuted itself into a very well defined creature.

In the work "Fig. 11, Ela Fling Fly, 2011, oil on panel," I began with raw shapes and splatters of paint. I slowly distilled and transmuted until the piece gave up its mundane form and became something from far beyond. Pigments alone are nothing; they are unrefined much just like the lead is in Alchemy, an unrefined bottom material. The application of those items was
where the real alchemical painting began. This piece was a testament to the fact that an ink stain could become something much more when a painter applied alchemical philosophy.

This piece maintained the same plasticity of my drawings that I worked with in, "Fig. 8."

In order to do this I wanted to use something that would absorb walnut ink and washes. The only thing I knew of at the time was paper. The problem was that I had to use paper on a large scale, but I needed the rigid support of panel to withstand the pressure of painting. I came up with the idea of using paper while it was permanently mounted on a panel to maintain absorbency. I hit a minor problem after I attached the paper to the panel, it warped the panel so much that I had to start over. Painting is about trial and error, much in the same vein as alchemy.

Once the initial stages of paper were adhered properly, I applied the inkblot the same way I did with my drawing *Netherlander* (Fig. 8).

Fig. 11, *Ela Fling Fly*, 2011, oil on panel
The inkblot took on the shape resembling an elephant. I used reference photos of the natural world to obtain shapes and forms that resembled creatures of this plane, but once the brush hit the panel, they were transmuted into something completely different. Some of the stock photos I used came from places such as National Geographic, Google images, Ernst Haeckel, books on various species, NASA photos, botany books, octopi, and even sea slugs. I was told as a budding artist that I have a vast repertoire of images, and ever since then I have stockpiled them in a filing cabinet. I stole images from magazines in waiting room and even went so far as to rip them out of magazines in stores. Once I saw the basic shape of what the image was leaning towards, I found the stockpile image that coincided with it and got the basic shape and morphed certain areas. This elephantine creature was splayed with a pallet that was directly taken from a close-up picture of a vagina.

The machines took on symbols that reoccur continuously in my current work, the elephant, and the color of flesh. The elephant is my favorite animal and I have been fascinated with it ever since I was a young boy and I will discuss the why later in this paper. Machines are hard metallic and I wanted to soften my machines with the color of flesh. This takes away their hard outer appearance and makes them soft and pliable. My concept was to keep the machines from my world as far away as possible from the ideas of conventional machines in society.

Out of the raw material of pigment and paper, I blended the ideas of the natural world and technical knowhow in order to find a design that matched the intended show's direction. This was the difficult part because I had an intended target direction but at the same time I had to let the painting speak and take on its own life. To me this painting was already alive before I even gave it a tangible form.
Another aspect of this painting that was transferred to later projects is the use of negative and positive spatial relationships. The subject was placed on a background that was vacant, that created a negative positive dialogue and sharp contrast with a sense of loneness. The reason for this was to tune out all of the unnecessary incidentals and draw the eyes sharply to the creature that was formed. The vacancy of the objects in space mimicked my own feelings of alienation during my academic life. This was the paradigm I was going to use for future pieces of the show.
CHAPTER 5

COMBAT ART

The military was and will likely always be a major influence on my art. During the six years I spent as an Airborne Infantryman, I saw and did so many amazing things that my life was changed forever. I was subjected to very intense training regimes, which made me view my own daily lifestyle as an artist with an incredible drive. I have been in places and done things most humans would find incredibly intimidating. That extreme lifestyle made me focus on my art with such fortitude and bravura some would say I am cocky, but it is not cockiness, it is confidence in myself and my abilities.

Fear

I have been all over the world, seen art and architecture first hand that most have only seen in books. I became so deeply immersed in other cultures that sometimes I felt as if I would forget where I was from. Many individuals have a hard time relating to what happened to me; at times I felt and still feel alienated and I believe that is one of the reasons why in my art everything is alien and out of this world. Due to my experiences, I can never create something that is part of the reality of this world because I don't feel like I belong to this world at all. I asked and still do ask myself this question: why would I paint something or create something that belongs to a place I don't feel a part of? After nearly escaping death, I feel I have one foot in this plane and one foot in another place, a place that I have created through my art.
During basic training and Airborne school, I repeated a passage to myself from a book over and over. This passage is called the "Bene Gesserit litany" and can be found in Frank Herbert's *Dune* series and is quoted as such:

I must not fear. Fear is the mind-killer. Fear is the little-death that brings total obliteration. I will face my fear. I will permit it to pass over me and through me. And when it has gone past I will turn the inner eye to see its path. Where the fear has gone there will be nothing. Only I will remain. (Herbert 8)

This passage helped me to overcome my worst fears in the Army. When I stood and faced what I considered certain death and traversed the perilous world of combat, I would repeat this phrase over and over in my mind. I originally had it written down and laminated, but soon I could recite it by memory. Imminent death was a constant threat and without this mental preparation I feel I would have certainly been swallowed whole.

When confronted with a blank canvas, I am many times overcome with all the avenues that lie before me. As an artist in academia, I am constantly comparing myself with the artists of years past, peers, and contemporary artists. Knowledge and ego are in a constant flux of questioning and comparing. Sometimes, I dream of no boundaries, no paths that I am predestined to follow, and no shoes I feel forced to fill. So to control my overactive drive for perfection, I once again repeat the passage from *Dune*. The passage allows me to traverse the infinite world of art and everything that goes into creating a piece, without crumbling before I even start.

"Fig. 12, 23JessGuar23, 2010-2012, mixed media," was the most difficult piece I created for the show. Evidence of this is apparent in the length of time I focused on it. It took two years
for me to bring this painting to a place that was suitable for public viewing. It posed so many problems for me and left me perplexed for some time. I normally paint on a squared or rectilinear canvas and build layers to convey a sense of depth. So I decided conceptually to create a machine/creature that did not exist in a squared/rectilinear format within its illusion of space, but, instead, was the entire canvas and the world where it existed.

Theoretically, I wanted a creature that drifted into our world but brought its own world contained within its body. The creature was half here, and half there, at the same time. In order for it to materialize here it needed to bring its world with it. The world that it came from is the same place that "Fig. 6," came from, the world.

Fig. 12, 23JessGuar23, 2010-2012, mixed media
of blueprints and diagrams. I imagined that it came here to see our cloud formations that have become so popular in its world. In order to create this concept, I knew I had to get rid of the traditional squared panel and directly cut this creature’s shape out of OSB panel. I made two separate pieces and attached them with a separation in-between with oak strips. I hid the oak strips with handmade chainmail. They needed to be guarded with armor so that nothing could cleave the two pieces apart. When the two pieces are put together with chainmail supports they resemble a human heart, which was directly referenced from this world. The creature’s form takes on the appearance of a vital organ within the human body as if it is trying to connect with us, letting us know that it is not harmful or evil even though it is strange and alien. I covered the panels with raised pieces of OSB sanded down and then layered the blueprints on top of it. I painted it, off and on for two years, very timid and controlled, not wanting to push it too far, for fear of ruining it. The passage from *Dune* was written on the wall right beside it.

*World Traveling*

While in the military, I became accustomed to strange worlds that were far different from the neighborhood where I grew up. I have traveled to Thailand, Cambodia, Japan, Korea, Israel, Panama, Egypt, Germany, and China. Every place I went, I made it a point to immerse myself in the culture. I would purposely lose myself then try to find my way back to base. Many of the places I traveled, I made a point to pick destinations that were unknown to most tourists. Due to my internal catalog, which consists of literally millions of people, places, art, and architecture, I never find that I am at a loss for subject matter. The majority of my paintings are an amalgamation of all these places and things. One idea that continuously entered my mind was that despite the language differences and physical borders between different cultures and countries, we are completely interconnected and very similar.
An example of this tangible idea can be found in the print, "Fig. 13, *Flying Machine 23.5, 2010, intaglio on paper.*" The idea for this piece came directly from that fact. My idea for this print was to create a lost codex, one that was created before the physical borders and different languages. I devised a fantasy within where the codex creators were the first humans and not necessarily from our timeline; therefore, there was a single primary language and they lived together as a single unit. My concept is that these people were either documenting visible unidentified flying machines or creating a flying machine that they wished to one day invent. Within the print, strange symbols and hieroglyphs are throughout; some are unintelligible due to the weathering from time. I used techniques that were traditional printing methods, like crackle grounds, photo transfers of Mayan hieroglyphs, rocker tools, over etching,
gouging the plate with sharp tools. I also used not so traditional techniques like placing the copper plate under a car tire and then punching the gas or shooting it with a .22 caliber handgun to create a sense of the wear of time. This stems from the idea of Japanese Wabi-Sabi, that through imperfection we can obtain beauty. I purposely destroyed and disfigured my plates almost to the point of no return and then brought them back to create a weathered look. This is why the meaning of the print is now lost; I intentionally wanted my piece to appear ruined, ancient, and weathered. While traveling through different places I never understood the reason for physical borders or lines of demarcation and prefabricated ideas of a culture, especially when I was in the military. This print of an ancient codex broke down these physical borders, demarcated the lines, and brought it all back to the beginning.

Machines of War

Even before I joined the military I was very interested in the machines of war. Tanks, fighter jets, gun books and magazines were always my first pick when I entered the local library. In 1994, when I joined the Army, I never dreamed I would be driving and riding those same war machines. Obviously, after seeing these machines in person and in action, my love for mechanics grew exponentially. I felt like I was that little boy again, thumbing through books, wishing I could drive one; I eventually drove tanks, and hummers, rode and jumped out of helicopters and planes. I was living a dream come true. This carried through into my art, including the love I have for human machines. Evidence of this can be seen in my painting, "Fig. 14, Best Friends, 2010, oil on panel." It was such a joy to paint something I cherished so much while in the military. Seeing tanks and being able to fight alongside of them was unbeatable.
One such amazing event happened when my military unit was pinned down and these monstrous machine beasts would come crashing through the woods and blow away whole city blocks in a matter of seconds. They were literally our best friends and our most valuable assets. As an infantry soldier, there is nothing to hide behind but a flak jacket and a weapon when the shit hits the fan. Clearly, when the tanks came rolling in, we all were saying hallelujah in our minds. This was the beginning concept for this painting, the title lays reference to the above mentioned and purposely depicting war machines as toys gave reference to my childhood and the
blending of the two very different worlds. Innocence and experience are combined into one piece but two separate ideas.

For my MFA thesis show I want the idea of innocence and experience combined and undetermined to be more prevalent. The concept evolved into the idea that these flying machines I created would be very old, created at the moment of the big bang, but their minds and bodies are childlike, soaking up information and ideas as they traverse the myriad planes of existence.

The piece, “Fig. 15, Groompa, 2012, oil on Canvas”, displayed these characteristics. The shape is fun, childlike, curvaceous and at the same time filled with mature avenues. The areas that make you question whether or not this piece was friend or foe are key to the concept stated above. These points of
questioning are due in part to the ambiguousness of the flying machine. Ambiguity is so important in my work, it helps keep the piece in constant flux. Is it a friend or is it a foe, as long as the mind cannot settle on one determinate, sits directly in line with my concept.

**Always a Warrior**

A very important aspect of military life is strategy. A soldier lives day in and day out in a complex chess game. The only difference about the chess game in the military is this: death rides your back constantly, whereas in civilian world, death only nips at our heels every once in a while. In relation to my art, this same chess game forms within my mind, yet in the art world, each piece becomes a combat field and I am the General. The *Aunguttara Nikaya* put it beautifully, "Warriors, warriors we call ourselves. We fight for splendid virtue, for high endeavor, for sublime wisdom, therefore we call ourselves warriors." (Millman 13) I am no longer a contracted warrior but I am still a warrior and I treat my art as a combat arena. I use military strategy and precision when painting. My mind and ideas are locked within a warriors frame work, my weapons are brushes and paint. Sun Tzu said: "The good fighters of old first put themselves beyond the possibility of defeat and then waited for an opportunity of defeating the enemy. To secure ourselves against defeat lies in our own hands but the opportunity of defeating the enemy is provided by the enemy himself. Thus the good fighter is able to secure himself against defeat." (Sun Tzu, IV, 1) As Sun Tzu stated, a good warrior puts himself in a position beyond the possibility of defeat or surrender. Relative to painting, this means to establish a state of mind where the goal is to complete the art piece but to not settle for something if it is not working. "Defeat lies in our own hands." Mental stability, confidence in the eye and trusting the intuitive response to painting is key to this statement. If you listen to the
piece and react to the marks intuitively, the piece will defeat itself and you will win. Watch the movements of your brushwork and search for the key to unraveling the piece. The art work will literally paint itself, or defeat itself. Thus you can never put yourself in position to fail because your piece of art has already given its secrets to you, as long as you listen to it. Professor Julie Heffernan, who is also a contemporary artist, astonished me when she said this exact thing.

To paraphrase what she said, I don't paint the paintings, if you listen and meditate on it, they will paint themselves. This floored me because she is one of my favorite artist in contemporary painting. Her painting, "Fig. 16, Fiery Sea, oil on canvas," is one influential piece and quite literally spawned my painting, "Fig. 17, Tiny Bubbles, 2008, oil on panel." After I saw Heffernan's work, I ran to the studio and decided to make an accompanying piece. I was so fascinated with the palette she used that I tried to mimic it as best I could. My
concept for this piece was: if I am going to take all my nightmares and fears and put them into one form what would it look like? The outcome was more ferocious than I had imagined. It became a multi-moutherd beast devouring anything in its path.

Fig. 17, *Tiny Bubbles*, 2008, oil on panel.
CHAPTER 6
SURREALISM

I can remember sitting in my English class in high school and a student who was sitting in front of me was thumbing through some postcards that he had obtained from a museum. The postcards were from the Salvador Dali Museum in St. Petersburg, Florida. I remember being so fascinated by his work, looking at a picture of his and seeing multiple variations of pictures within pictures, or double images, astonished me.

Fig. 18. Salvador Dali, *Swans Reflecting Elephants*, 1937, oil on canvas. Image courtesy of dali-gallery.com.

One picture of his in particular, "Fig. 18, *Swans Reflecting Elephants*, 1937, oil on canvas," held my attention and intrigues me even to this day. It is an amazing double image with hidden avenues that only the mind can explore. It is a picture worth looking at over and over again,
because every time I do, it holds an entirely different meaning for me. That is the beauty of surrealism for me. I can look at the same image over and over and infer something completely different every time.

The definition of surrealism according to *The American Heritage Dictionary* is "a 20th century literary and artistic movement that attempts to express the workings of the subconscious by fantastic imagery and incongruous juxtaposition of subject matter." (827)

By definition alone my work falls directly into this category. The piece, "Fig. 19, 23rd Dimension, 2012, oil and tempera on book cover," was a direct subconscious response to internal tumultuous forces that are ever present in my life. The piece was painted on an Encyclopedia book cover because I was referencing the direct idea of what an Encyclopedia is suppose to be, the sum of all knowledge that we have in our known universe.

The concept for this piece came from the idea that we are all made of recycled matter. The same
atoms that were here at the beginning of time are intertwined within all of us. So, all of us living on the planet have the same atoms that were here at the dawn of time. I imagined that all knowledge, known and unknown, resides within us, all we have to do is tap into it. This imagined place is where my creature resides, in that space where all knowledge is attainable and converges. I called this place the 23rd dimension of existence. I painted this piece with tempera first, which is egg yolk mixed with pigment. The tempera is water-soluble, so I can immediately paint directly on top of this layer with oil paint. I used slow glazes of oil to bring out the form of my creature. The creature itself has one mechanical wing attached to its appendage. This was a completely subconscious painting. I did not think, I just reacted to the one idea that permeated during my process. This is the idea that all knowledge converges into one place, the 23rd dimension.

One surrealist process that I use quite often in my work, is automatic drawing. Automatic drawing according to Warlick:

was developed by the surrealists, as a means of expressing the subconscious. In automatic drawing, the hand is allowed to move ‘randomly’ across the paper. In applying chance and accident to mark-making, drawing is to a large extent freed of rational control. Hence the drawing produced may be attributed in part to the subconscious and may reveal something of the psyche, which would otherwise be repressed. (Warlick 79)

In "Fig.20, Mammothic, 2011, mixed media on panel," is an automatic drawing/painting that dives into the depths of my subconscious. Ever since I was a little boy I have been fascinated with elephants and mammoths. It started when I was at the Catskill Game Farm in New York,
and saw that there was an Elephant you could ride. I don't remember how many times I rode it. The only thing I can remember is getting off the ride, and then running as fast as I could to get back in line again.

When I started this particular piece, the walnut ink that I used to create the ink blot immediately took on an all too familiar shape, the elephant, but more specifically the mammoth. The process of automatic drawing pulled these forms into a tangible environment. Once the form was there, I slowly refined the image until it was apparent not only to myself but also to any viewer that walked by. All things elephant were intertwined within this show and within my subconscious.
CHAPTER 7

SUMMARY

When I created these pictures that explored other worlds, trans-dimensional creatures, and alternate spaces, it was interesting to see how my pictures appeared to not be grounded in this world. I believe they were sprouted from my experiences on this planet. They were in fact grounded here, and are vessels of my life experiences. I was perplexed to see how much of my daily life actually was portrayed in my art. From fear to alchemy, it all became intertwined with every piece I created. My work pushed the internal process of experience and creation and harnessed the subjective process. Internalizations were manifested into flying machines that moved into our world by literally intruding into our physical plane, or metaphorically by the imagination.

In conclusion, my art is a very personal exploration. For these pieces, I combined many different aspects of my life into one homogenous group of works. Objective art doesn't exist for me, it is a subjective process that intertwines all of my experiences. By using surrealistic techniques of automatism and automatic drawing, I find that my childhood and the military experiences are completely linked with my academic and artistic choices. This display of art made these connections visible. What I once believed was separate became whole and complete. Once my fear receded I was able to see this and it allowed my artistic voice to shine through.
WORKS CITED


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CATALOGUE OF EXHIBITION

Slocumb Gallery, East Tennessee State University
NetherLander Major
ShhBrump
Groompa
Mammothic
NeoKite
Ela Fling Fly
VITA

JASON SABBIDES

Education: MFA, Art and Design, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee, 2012


Teaching Experience:

Instructor on Record, 2-Dimensional Design, Spring/Fall semester, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee, 2011

Art Instructor, Artopia Fine Art Store, Johnson City, Tennessee, 2010

Teaching Assistant, Painting 1 with Mira Gerard, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee, 2009, 2010

Teaching Assistant, 2-Dimensional Design with Stacy Isenbarger, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee, 2010

Teaching Art Fundamentals to Adults with Disabilities, Open Hearts Art Center, Asheville, North Carolina, 2006-2009

Teaching Art Fundamentals to Adults with Severe Disabilities, Compensatory Education Teacher J.; Iverson Center, Morganton, North Carolina, 2004-2005

Awards and Grants:

First Place, Annual Juried Open Art Competition, Old Rock School, Valdese, North Carolina, 2008

University Scholar, University of North Carolina, Asheville, North Carolina, 2008

Undergraduate Research Summer Grant, University of North Carolina, Asheville, North Carolina, 2008
Best in Show for Painting, Montford Fourth Annual Arts & Music Festival, 2007

Honors Scholarship, Western Carolina University, North Carolina, 2006

Selected Solo Exhibitions: “Float In Float Out,” Slocumb Gallery, Johnson City, Tennessee, 2012

“Float In Float Out”, William King Museum, Abington, Virginia, 2012


"Sabbides," J. Iverson Riddle Developmental Center, Morganton, North Carolina, 2005


“Dogwood Regional Fine Art Exhibition,” Bennett Galleries, Juror: Virginia Derryberry, Knoxville, Tennessee, 2011


“Art in the Airport,” McGhee Tyson Airport, Juror: Stephen Wicks, Knoxville, Tennessee, 2011

606 State Street Gallery, Bristol, Tennessee, 2010

Upstream People Gallery, Omaha, NE. Juror: Laurence Bradshaw, 2010

Blowfish Emporium Gallery, Bristol, Tennessee, 2010

“Stimulus,” Reece Museum, Johnson City, Tennessee, 2010

"Oh Chaos," Flood Gallery, Asheville, North Carolina, 2009
“Impressions,” Tipton Street Gallery, Juror: David Mazure, Johnson City, Tennessee, 2009


"5th Annual Selected Artwork," Highsmith University Union Art Gallery, University Of North Carolina Asheville, NC

“Art Front Selected Art Show,” University Of North Carolina Asheville, North Carolina, 2008


“Unexpected Beauty,” Hosted by the Underground, Asheville, North Carolina, 2007

“Art in the Airport,” Inaugural Exhibition, Asheville Regional Airport, North Carolina, 2007


“Highsmith Selected Art Show,” University Of North Carolina Asheville, North Carolina, 2007

“Old Rock School Art Competition,” Valdese, North Carolina, 2006

“Tour d' Art & Historic Morganton Festival,” Morganton, North Carolina, 2006

Collections:


"Tiny Bubbles," David Hopes, Asheville, North Carolina

"Line of Sight," Mira Gerard, Johnson City, Tennessee
Publications:


Arnold Wengrow, “Art: Gallery A Big Hit At Airport,” Asheville Citizen-Times, August 18, 2007. Pg A4