Discount Meat

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ABSTRACT

In the narrative painting series *Discount Meat*, I employ grotesque realism to emphasize the rupture of corporeal and social boundaries, reframing the body as a site of discontinuity whose physical and perceptual structures are in constant flux. Through this approach, I synthesize fragments of lived and observed experience into invented narratives with an emphasis on embodiment. By emphasizing the apertures connecting the body’s interior with the outside world, I seek to problematize the image of a discrete self, suggesting instability as a central element of physical identity. Across this web of disjointed narratives, I strive to portray the emotional range and complexity of human experience in terms of vivid physicality, depicting tedium and pain while allowing space in the work for levity and imagination.

INDEX WORDS: Grotesque, Body, Abject, Figurative, Painting, Narrative, Bakhtin
DISCOUNT MEAT

by

LARKIN FORD

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Master of Fine Arts

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DISCOUNT MEAT

by

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DEDICATION

I would like to thank my mother and father, Janet and James Ford, and my brother, Hart, for being supportive of my creative path from the beginning. Growing up in a rural community in which artistic activities are often considered frivolous, I was incredibly fortunate to be part of a family that encouraged and valued my creative pursuits. My earliest memories include my dad teaching me to draw with branches in the sand of the unpaved road, and my mom painting paper plate masks with me. There is never a shortage of singing and guitar playing around their home, and I did not realize that there was anything atypical about this until years later.

My friends inside and outside the program have also been indispensable, a vital, supportive community and a humbling reminder of how much I have to learn.

Finally, I have to express greatest gratitude to my love, Hannah Doyle, who has shown superhuman patience, support, and understanding throughout the thesis process, even as she pursues her own degree in creative writing. She is endlessly inspiring and I could not have come this far without her.
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This thesis would not have been possible without the guidance and support of my thesis committee members, and the other faculty members of the Ernest G. Welch School of Art and Design. I would like to recognize each of my committee members in turn: Craig Drennen has increased my understanding of the vast expanse of possibilities within contemporary art while constructively shaking the foundations of my preconceptions as a narrative painter. John Decker has made me newly conscious of a long genre painting lineage that I now consider myself a part of, and thanks to him I have begun balance that awareness with my position in the contemporary art landscape. Christina West has supported my first forays into sculpture and has also been insightful in assessing paintings—particularly as a strong proponent of balancing depiction with pure materiality. Matthew Sugarman has a keen eye for color and composition, as well as a gift for free association. He has been a frank and supportive voice and has been generous with his time inside and outside of class.

Though I have had the most contact with my own thesis committee recently, I would like to acknowledge some other faculty as well. Joe Peragine has been a strong influence on me, particularly in his energetic and fearless approach to a huge variety of scales, media, and concepts. Ralph Gilbert has kept me focused on the fundamental formal considerations essential to painting, even as my subject matter and paint handling have altered considerably. I knew he would have a great deal to offer with regard to building credible spaces and forms from imagination, but I could not have known how much.
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I begin my oil paintings with disconnected narrative fragments, grafting together memories, secondhand anecdotes, and literary sources with stories and images of my own invention. All of these fragments begin rooted in everyday experience. Some remain within the world of the possible, while others follow strands of absurdist reasoning or principles of the grotesque body further afield, resulting in otherworldly imagery.

I use short written descriptions and sketches from imagination in order to concretize my imprecise mental impressions of the recalled or imagined scenarios. I then refine and expand the imagery that will compose the final painting through further drawings, written descriptions, short stories, photographs, and on-site watercolors of selected environments. The narratives and imagery shift throughout this sequence of translations and alterations. I continue adjusting the image on the canvas, often leaving remnants of earlier stages in impasto or half-effaced underpainting. As I excise some elements and graft on others, the original narrative begins to unravel and transform.

At some point in this process, the painting detaches itself from the anecdote that spawned it, resulting in a new, unrecognizable entity that is free from the fixity of its initial sources. My painting *Feeding the Cats* (Figure 1), for instance, was conceived as part of a series about a woman building a companion out of garbage. As I developed the scene, I worked from a watercolor study of the crawlspace under my parents’ house and a drawing of my own kitchen, filling the interior space with figures from imagination. As the pieces congealed into a preliminary watercolor, then into a large oil painting, the grotesque activity beyond the transparent wall became more crowded and bizarre. Boys in rubber masks reach past lovers’ legs to pull down a man’s jeans, figures hidden within
the cabinet force-feed him marbles, and two babies fight on the kitchen counter. As often occurs during this improvisational process, the initial narrative became one of many subplots within an illogical stew of bodies.

This method encourages slippage between the painting’s sources and the personal associations others bring to the work, allowing space for viewers to connect their personal associations and interpretations to the paintings’ enigmatic narratives and grimy materiality. My paintings emphasize the grotesque elements in otherwise mundane scenes, reframing the body as a site of discontinuity whose physical and perceptual borders are in constant flux.

2 MIKHAIL BAKHTIN AND GROTESQUE REALISM

Bizarre bodily imagery had played a central role in my artwork for years before I encountered Russian scholar Mikhail Bakhtin. His concept of grotesque realism, a coarsely physical aesthetic mode and a frank, materialistic perspective on embodiment, forms the theoretical framework for my current work. Where I had previously portrayed the body’s limitations, pain, and inevitable collapse as tragic, the paintings in my thesis exhibition temper this view with Bakhtin’s portrayal of human embodiment as a vibrant, communal phenomenon. “In grotesque realism... the bodily element is deeply positive. It is presented not in a private, egoistic form, severed from other spheres of life, but as something universal, representing all the people.”

Death need only be feared if one identifies as an ego whose unique spark threatens to flicker out. The grotesque body, privileging humans’ physical commonalities, envisions life not as a quavering candle flame, but as an abundant communal resource. “The material bodily

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principle is contained not in the biological individual, not in the bourgeois ego, but in the people, a people who are continually growing and renewed.” While the essential optimism inherent in this shared model of human embodiment resonates with Marxist utopianism and Buddhist ego-dissolution, its imagery is distinctive in its emphatic link between vitality and coarse materialism. The sacred communal body’s characteristic openings and bulges may seem indecent or disgusting, but Bakhtin frames this visceral imagery in generous, positive terms:

Contrary to modern canons, the grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits. The stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world. This means that the emphasis is on the apertures or convexities, or on various ramifications and offshoots: the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly, the nose. The body discloses its essence as a principle of growth which exceeds its own limits only in copulation, pregnancy, childbirth, the throes of death, eating, drinking, or defecation.3

For Bakhtin, these orifices, protrusions, and excretions embody the interpenetration and exchange between the subject and the external world. In extruding waste from the self into shared external space, public urination and defecation form potent emblems of social transgression. The painting Home (Figure 2), created six months before the paintings that constitute my thesis exhibition, drew inspiration from the boundary-crossing impropriety of the grotesque mode. In this piece, a teenage son returns home after a night of drinking to find his parents’ burglar door locked and, bracing himself against the door frame, urinates through the screen. The absurdity of his act is compounded by the exaggerated quantity of urine, forming a puddle that seems to crawl across the floor of its own volition and reinforcing the image of a

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2 Bakhtin, Rabelais and His World, 19.
3 Bakhtin, Rabelais and His World, 26.
boundary violated, a home despoiled. In this interjection of coarse body humor into a tense family drama, the grotesque may elicit laughter, a gesture of liberation. Whether overcoming one’s shame at impropriety or one’s fear of death, the laughter of life-affirming transgression disrupts the tragic mode and dissolves its attendant fears and inhibitions. Bakhtin privileges the comic over the tragic, linking solemnity with cowardice and inhibition: "Fear is the extreme expression of narrow-minded and stupid seriousness, which is defeated by laughter . . . Complete liberty is possible only in the completely fearless world." While Bakhtin dwells on the redemptive, utopian character of uninhibited bodily expression, I attempt to depict grotesque action as a morally ambivalent force with problematic as well as benign potential. The grotesque realist perspective, on the other hand, is inherently valuable as an active affirmation of the world as it exists.

3 GROTESQUE REALISM IN NARRATIVE PAINTING

Before encountering and drawing inspiration from Bakhtin’s formulation of the grotesque, I felt the profound influence of sixteenth century Dutch painter Pieter Bruegel. His paintings encompass an enormous emotional range, unified by his consistent emphasis on the grubby physicality of humans and their surroundings in complex works woven with anecdotal threads. His entire oeuvre bubbles with life, from his paintings of otherworldly creatures mutating, copulating, and giving birth midair, to his seasonal depictions of bustling sowers and harvesters toiling and feasting. Bakhtin’s theories draw their earthy imagery from the history and literature of the medieval period during which Bruegel lived and painted. In fact, his paintings of laborers with potbellies, codpieces, and red noses may have had a direct influence on Bakhtin’s

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4 Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 41.
list of protrusions. His work’s rich multiplicity rewards prolonged viewing and permits a broad range of emotion and symbolism to share the visual field.

Viewed in light of Bakhtin’s theory of the grotesque, Bruegel’s painting *The Dutch Proverbs* (Figure 3) is both a sprawling celebration of abundant life and a compendium of temperate folk wisdom. While Bruegel’s imagery derives from proverbs warning against gluttony, lechery, and sloth, the vibrancy of the bustling scene reflects an embrace of materiality. Moreover, the multitude of metaphorical scenarios rendered within one illusionistic space results in a chaotic, multivalent painting teeming with activity and rich with potential for interpretation. A man defecates from a second-story window onto a globe while a woman below ties a gangly demon to a pillow on the ground. Pigs run rampant throughout the image, drinking from wine casks, devouring crops, and being shorn and fed roses. In its abundance of potent combinations of animals, food, and bodily functions, the painting provides an endless feast of perplexing spectacle.

Grotesque realism has survived into the present day as an influential undercurrent in figurative painting. In the distorted body as a device for muddling reality and imagination, I feel a powerful affinity with the contemporary American painter Nicole Eisenman. In her inventive, unpredictable paintings, Eisenman applies the omnivorous attitude of the grotesque body toward visual culture as she consumes, digests, and combines an array of elements from German Expressionism to newspaper cartoons and digital media. Her work explores a broad visual and thematic range, addressing social injustice, queer sexuality, and art-world hypocrisy in stinging and playful ways.

Eisenman invents many of her scenarios, but she also includes direct appropriations. In her painting *The Triumph of Poverty* (Figure 4), a man with buttocks in lieu of genitals holds a
leash leading foot-tall likenesses of Bruegel’s blind men reproduced in her loose brushwork amidst surroundings depicted in an array of painterly techniques. This gesture acknowledges Eisenman’s grotesque painterly lineage while claiming her own distinct territory. By relinquishing some of Bruegel’s realism and placing his composition into a pastiche, she pushes bodily and stylistic mutability to new levels of absurdity and pictorial innovation, thus revitalizing the grotesque legacy and renegotiating the boundaries of the real.

While the blind men anchor the painting to this lineage, they are but one note in The Triumph of Poverty’s layered polyphony of painterly styles. Across the canvas, large areas of depiction flatten into planes of saturated color or slip beneath passages of post-impressionist impasto. Eisenman merges these disparate elements into a unified patchwork through her distinctive facture. By keeping her work at arm’s length from naturalistic rendering, she allows illogical elements to hover between literalism and metaphor in her indeterminate painted space.

In the painting, a naked woman with flesh-colored squares sewn to her bare skin steers a doorless hatchback, similarly mottled with patches of rust and gray primer. The pieced-together quality of the woman and her hatchback echo the quilt-like stylistic pastiche of their surroundings. Among the ragtag group of companions trudging alongside her, some appear loosely naturalistic, while others’ bodies are charged with blotches of neon or smeared into fetid gray silhouettes. The painting hovers between literal and allegorical realities, between deadpan and farce, in such a way that her world becomes multi-layered, resistant to confinement within any single reading.

In a 2016 article in Hyperallergic, John Yau argues that “for Eisenman, color and style are political.” If an artist’s mode of depiction reflects ideology, he suggests, uniformity is

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repressive by its nature. By reflecting individuals’ varied interiority through impossible anatomies and protean paint handling, Eisenman “suggests that stylistic unity is an illusion, that the world never conformed to such repressive strictures. Among other things, she recognizes that all of us, in our many differences (sexual, racial, and lifestyle) don’t fit in, and that the ideal of fitting in is not actually community building.” These restless painterly shifts permit many interior lives to materialize alongside one another. This stylistic schizophrenia also brings the painted surface, with its patchwork of approaches, into conversation with the depicted space.

Where Eisenman permits diverse graphic and painterly styles to collide on the canvas, Bruegel and other Renaissance painters build illusionistic depth from evenly rendered, naturalistic volumes and nuanced effects of light, melding his observations and imagined elements into a cohesive space. In Bruegel’s case, this reflects an interest in understanding and faithfully representing nature in order to create a believable world. Abraham Ortelius, a cartographer and friend of Bruegel, wrote that “. . . it is Nature herself should be imitated, not the artist. This applies to our Bruegel, whose pictures, as I always say, bear the stamp of nature rather than art.” The humanist view positing art as a second nature encourages an artistic aspiration toward stylistic transparency. Bruegel’s painting commits to its role as a window through its cohesive illusionism in order to place emphasis on its content.

My own paintings’ degree of realism falls closer to the work of Bruegel than that of Eisenman. While I agree with Eisenman about the immense difference between any two people, broad range of identities and experiences, and admire her ability to externalize these differences through paint, I seek to weave these intangible complexities into the work through the

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6 Yau. "A Truly Great Artist."
8 In placing my own work between these artists’ on the spectrum from naturalism to abstraction, I am not attempting to equate myself to either in terms of ability or historical importance.
implication of nebulous narratives, balancing legibility and confusion so as to leave adequate space for a broad range of potential interpretations. Painterly naturalism is a useful tool in representing the specificity of those scenarios’ components, ambiguous as the narratives themselves may be.

In contrast to Eisenman’s fragmentation, naturalism is also a means of asserting our shared physicality. Despite the innumerable forms of ideological and experiential difference, our bodies all contain comparable plumbing and ductwork, all must consume and excrete material, and all are subject to the body’s deterioration and collapse. People’s attitudes about these inescapable elements of our embodiment, however, vary immensely. In Bakhtin’s affirmation of the most abhorrent elements of embodiment, he provides a liberating alternative to fear and repression.

4 EXPERIENCE AND IMAGINATION IN EARLY GRADUATE WORK

In the years before graduate school, my work had settled into a bleak, shadowy style, rendering scenes of mythic violence in a Southern Gothic vein. In my first year of graduate school, I felt compelled to latch my work to direct experience. In this work I explored psychological and physical ailments through drawings that employed a gloomy, theatrical realism. I sifted through my personal experiences for imagery, feeling that this origin was necessary to anchor the work to reality. Sickness (Figure 5), for instance, portrayed a young couple vomiting, the man into a toilet and the woman into a garbage can. The image was inspired by a food poisoning experience, dramatized into a baroque charcoal image. While I addressed bodily degradation in this drawing, I still conceived of it in terms of its physical limitations, not its generative energy. This pessimistic perspective locked the drawing into a tragic mode. I had
taken steps into grotesque content, but the form was still inhibited by my fixation on personal experience as a precondition for authentic imagery and by my reluctance to embrace comic elements. Although *Sickness* depicted viscerally charged content, it did so within the dominant cultural model of nauseous aversion.

This desire to dissociate from physical processes, much like the act of vomiting itself, embodies abjection in banishing problematic matter from the self. Julia Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror* examines abjection, the acute revulsion that results from a rupture in the distinction between the subject’s ego and the body’s materiality. Abjection confronts the ego with the most vile elements of its own objecthood, abolishing the borders that differentiate us from various objects of revulsion. Kristeva characterizes abjection as the “retching that thrusts me to the side and turns me away from defilement, sewage, and muck.”9 This instinct of vehement denial protects the ego against “a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me. There, abject and abjection are my safeguards. The primers of my culture.”10 Kristeva’s theory points up the problems inherent in this phobic aversion to physical reality. If I may simplify both concepts, the crucial distinction between the abject and the grotesque is the difference between the rejection and acceptance of the world as it is. The cultural myth of the body as a discrete, inviolable entity violently rejects the body’s coarse materiality and excreta. Grotesque realism accepts, even *celebrates* these elements through comic exaggeration and the emphasis on shared embodiment. The struggle to accept oneself as a mortal vessel can be grueling, but it is made more attainable through redemptive laughter, which reframes painful truths rather than denying them.

In *Kitchen Table, Trap Hill* (Figure 6), I developed the comic side of my grotesque sensibility. It occupies a larger scale (48 x 96”), providing ample room for nine figures from

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infancy to old age rather than the one young couple of the previous piece. The figures share the table, situating this image in a social rather than private domestic space. A grandmother eats eggs, a large man on an IV drip drinks a mid-morning beer, and a young woman holds her baby dangerously close to the grandmother’s knife. Even the unconscious men stuck through the wall imply an energetic brawl in the recent past. The image’s variety of figures and activities is crucial in bringing together disparate emotions. Although the theme of hardscrabble resilience runs throughout the image, its occupants’ emotional range varies from the infant’s unguarded bewilderment to the bald man’s stony fatalism, with an element of farce in the naked rump protruding through the wall. As this painting’s emotional range had expanded from previous work, its focus had shifted from the allegorical toward the anecdotal.

This painting, like much of my work, depicts a rural area of the American southeast. I spent the first sixteen years of my life in Sugar Loaf, a small Appalachian community in Alexander County, North Carolina. It is a rich source of bizarre anecdotes and characters, and it is the setting for the narratives that inform many of my paintings. However, even my most direct transcriptions of memories emerge as works of fiction. I find it useful to begin from a place of vivid specificity, using memory as a well of images that I then adapt and rearrange as desired. Pieces of *Kitchen Table, Trap Hill* have roots in direct experience, but they are radically altered from their source material. In the painting, two boys under the table throw action figures into a dark hole beneath the floorboards. The hole in the kitchen floor is invented, but my family had an indoor outhouse—a clivis multrum—until I was eight years old, and my brother once threw my favorite action figure into it. The man on crutches kicking a prostrate man in the ribs is borrowed from Samuel Beckett’s novel *Molloy*, and the sickly baby above the knife emerged during preparatory drawings. As I intermingled altered anecdotes, borrowed imagery, and
invented elements, compressing multiple fragments into one painting, I felt a new sense of permission to explore broader possibilities of narrative invention.

After completing this painting, I became increasingly interested in further exploiting the formal devices of painting to sever imagery from its sources. In subsequent works, mental impressions of sensation and meaning are altered first in their imprecise translation into painted imagery, and again during each act of looking and interpretation. Whether images spring from literary sources or direct experience, they attain a sense of equivalent reality in the process of their integration into the painting, becoming windows into a parallel realm with its own internal logic. Just as Eisenman enriches and disrupts her illusions through shifting facture, other contemporary painters have likewise influenced me in exploit this multivalence, whether exploiting the ideological connotations of different imagery or pushing bodily exaggeration to the point of visual incoherence.

Neo Rauch depicts cryptic narratives that unfold across history in images laden with portals between German countryside and vague institutional structures, as in Der Laden (Figure 7). Rauch combines the graphic styles of socialist realism, advertisement, and biomorphic abstraction. In his disorienting fusions of an idyllic past and a garish industrial present, he links socialist propaganda and capitalist advertising through their romanticized visual manifestations. He describes himself as a “peristaltic filtration system on the river of time,” digesting and recontextualizing elements from throughout history.11

Where Rauch dissects and recombines historical fragments, Trenton Doyle Hancock hacks apart and reconfigures the body through his flattened, exaggerated forms and manic energy. The wildly exaggerated apertures and protuberances, abundant rot and growth, and

constant gush of material into and out of bodies in Hancock’s work amplify grotesque principles to a farcical level. His paintings offset torture and putrefaction with a zany cartoon logic while expanding his intricate personal mythology. In *Descension and Dissension* (Figure 8), figures’ bodies are riddled with holes and the ground seems to crawl with half-formed beings. The cavernous space suggests a bodily interior. Hancock blends figure and ground, text and image, paint and found objects on the canvas with impunity. Hancock, Rauch, Eisenman, and other contemporary artists in this vein of fragmented figuration have informed my understanding of the negotiable boundary between cohesion and rupture, particularly as it affects the emergence or dissolution of space and narrative. Each painting permits various degrees of illusion within part of the surface, then disrupts that artifice through abrupt discontinuities in the visual syntax, directing attention to the ideas implicit in the quoted imagery or reiterating the flatness of the surface. The images’ narrative qualities are suppressed by the corporeal and historical elements in Hancock’s and Rauch’s imagery, but remain latently present.

Inspired by this boundless expanse of stylistic possibilities and the potential for openness and mystery that seemed inherent in fragmentation, I attempted to introduce elements of confusion and ambiguity through similar devices during my second year of graduate school. In *A Crowded Yard* (Figure 9), an image of a leg and a pile of chairs opens into a cocoon-like geometrical form while swaths of bright, chaotic impasto interrupt the painting’s surface. While these devices broadened the visual language of the paintings, they each carried a set of associations ranging from abstract expressionism to surrealism. These visual devices, intended to open a space for the unknowable nature of lived experience, broadened my graphic vocabulary and introduced an unfamiliar friction in their interruption of pictorial illusion. However, my forays into stylistic pastiche felt arbitrary. Where Eisenman’s stylistic agility reflects a vital facet
of her worldview, I found my own priorities undermined when departing from narrative and physical elements. Sandwiched between geometrical flourishes and gestural abstraction, the realist rendering of the figure and chairs ceased to function as an imagined world, and became another style plucked out of its original historical context. By seeing how easily stylistic shifts drowned out the elements most important to me, I found that formal cohesion is a necessary for my painted worlds, foregrounding their narrative elements through a closer approximation of quotidian visual experience.

I work in a spectrum of loose illusionism to foster the sense of an autonomous space with its own natural laws, allowing a painting to function as a portal into another world. In *A Crowded Yard* and my other forays into collage aesthetics, the breaks between tight and loose handling, between realist and fantastical content, were obvious at all points. The result was a patchwork of imagery whose fragmentation occurred according to a formal rather than narrative logic. Since its components coexisted on their shared surface more than in space, it did not read as a narrative at all.

This formal and conceptual experiment clarified my intentions by proving incompatible with them. A jumble of real and unreal imagery, all feeling equally arbitrary in their inclusion, obliterated the possibility of a grounded narrative, when I had intended to enrich it. I now had a clearer sense of the viable range of subjects and modes of facture within which I could move while still sustaining the illusion of a painting as a window into ambiguous space and suspended movement, rather than a combination of elements on a flat surface.

By seeing my default painting mode combined with a broad spectrum of historical styles, I was able to see my ingrained aesthetic anew. My quasi-realist approach to figurative oil painting has many formal advantages in allowing me to combine elements from disparate
sources and adjust composition and narrative on the fly. This stylistic approach, along with my subject matter also places the work in conversation with history painting and regionalist murals.

While I choose this form primarily for its capacity to reify dense stories across one’s field of vision, I also attempt to exploit its historical freight, presenting stylistically cohesive scenes while depicting disruptive elements within their pictorial field. While I respect the paintings of Thomas Hart Benton and acknowledge some formal similarities with his generation of regionalists, I distrust such painters’ tendencies to monumentalize and generalize experience into a national allegory of forward movement, as in *Achelous and Hercules* (Figure 10). I subvert the grand narrative painting tradition through my focus on obsolescence over progress, and on transgressive rather than exemplary behavior. My anecdotes are built on idiosyncracy and friction rather than the organic social unity and shared regional identity that Benton’s work posits.

characters’ marginality—not as mythical working-class heroes, but as damaged, disillusioned people prone to eccentric or incoherent activity. As opposed to Benton’s image of a wholesome consensus society, these figures’ lives are pulled in a multitude of directions. Embodiment, fundamental point of physical connection emphasized in my paintings, is shared between all humans, but it carries no inherent ideology. I refrain from pressing my figures into the service of sweeping, totalizing historical narratives, instead employing their variety and dissociation as indicators of the breadth of human experience.

5 **DISCOUNT MEAT THESIS EXHIBITION**

In my thesis work, I have concentrated on the grotesque subject as a constantly shifting mass of materials and as a vehicle for open-ended metaphor and narrative. The specificity of the
environments and the ubiquity of similar homes, restaurants, and government buildings enables potential associations with a broad range of experiences. The ambiguity of the overarching narratives, as well as the identity of some objects and figures and the wobbly internal logic of the series, accommodates a broad range of emotional and interpretive responses.

In *Sleepers* (Figure 11), the most glaring ambiguity lies with the identity of the five tubular forms whose segmented pink bodies resemble giant worms, figures in sleeping bags, or sentient intestines. The orifices are prominent but ambiguous. One hangs open like an unconscious mouth, while another is pursed like an anus. Regardless of their exact identities, the elision of all features other than their apertures casts these amorphous bodies as simple digestive tubes. In this harsh light, the body’s transformation of food into feces is central to its identity. During the exhibition, this painting faced the gallery entrance, positioning it to condition the rest of the viewing experience. Since this piece introduced one of the controlling ideas of the grotesque body, I was free to render other bodies more naturalistically while still visually linking them with its underlying metaphor of the body as a tube, positing excretion as a precondition for embodiment.

Even when painting unambiguously human figures, I find omission and exaggeration useful as means of obtaining new perspectives on the human body. By obscuring characters’ faces and exaggerating the permeability of the body’s surface, these paintings diverge from portraiture and historical painting in their emphasis on the raw physicality of the body. In *Wet Food* (Figure 12), a disembodied head on a table presents the most obvious disruption of an otherwise quotidian scene. The head is harshly backlit with its face thrown into shadow, but a moment’s scrutiny reveals it as sculpted slime, garbage, and a blond wig. A pipe runs from the head through a tank and into the ribcage of the young woman eating a can of cat food. IV bags
hang in the darkened room, their tubes also leading to the open neck. The slimy head belongs to
the trash golem, a figure that recurs throughout the series as a wheelbarrow of garbage, then in
this early stage of construction, and finally as an autonomous being. In her patched-together,
heterogeneous appearance, she exemplifies the conception of the body as a perpetual work in
progress with permeable boundaries between its interior and exterior. Pipes and hoses recur
throughout this series of paintings, emphasizing the constant fluidity of this boundary.

In *Faith Healer at the Buffet* (Figure 13), the assimilation of matter from the exterior
world into the self is likewise emphasized, this time through a depiction of eating that is
simultaneously more commonplace and more monstrous than the golem’s head. The child’s
cavernous mouth, his most prominent feature, presents him as an animalistic force of
consumption, eager to pull as much as possible of his surroundings into himself. The baby’s eyes
are obscured behind his crumpled witch mask, reducing his face to a totem of Bakhtinian
gluttony.

As the grotesque subject struggles to consume the world, external forces eat away at the
body. The faith healer, obscured by a heat lamp stands with his arms thrust into the hot bar,
blistering in the trays of hot food. Like the baby’s mouth, his blisters act as gates between his
interior and the outside world. While the child engulfs and absorbs the soup, the faith healer
compromises his body’s boundaries in the opposite direction, letting his flesh dissolve into the
other edible matter.

The paintings’ environments likewise emphasize the interpenetration of internal and
external spaces. In keeping with this meshing of figure and ground, I prefer to position the
bizarre elements in my paintings as concentrated points within an overall grotesque world rather
than as monstrous aberrations in an otherwise sterile one. I push the various interiors toward
decay in order to suggest a parallel between buildings and bodily interiors. In the leftmost panel of *Learning to Walk* (Figure 14), the YMCA roof bulges downward in a soggy mass with a garden hose spooling from one of its creases, visually mimicking a monstrous womb and umbilical cord. Architecture becomes more bodily as it falls apart, and walls bulging with water damage, pipes and hoses, mold, cracks, and clutter are a few means of mirroring our bodies’ internal complexity and undermining the geometrical austerity of the artificial structures we occupy. The shabby domestic interiors in *Wet Food* and *Sleepers* likewise convey the gradual accumulation of litter and wear, the sagging of furniture. The home, like the body, bears a tenuous distinction between inside and outside, complicated by its plumbing and wiring, its doors and windows. It, too, is vulnerable to time, use, and disuse.

On the other end of the spectrum from the worn domestic space and its corporeal connotations, there are numerous impersonal public spaces that exude muted dread. Government agencies, banks, and hospital waiting rooms exemplify a type of public space that exerts an emotional influence—usually some combination of boredom and anxiety—on many among the broad swath of the population that enters their doors. Anthropologist Marc Augé describes these merely functionary areas as non-places: “A person entering the space of non-place is relieved of his usual determinants. He becomes no more than what he does or experiences in the role of passenger, customer, or driver.”12 Non-places neutralize identity, unifying citizens in implicit affirmation of their underlying power structures. Unlike Bakhtin’s communal dissolution of societal hierarchy, this intermingling of social classes only denotes the shared necessity of some

unpleasant or tedious task. In *DMV* (Figure 15), blue- and white-collar workers, young and old wait in identical blue plastic chairs beneath ghoulish fluorescents. Just as the green cast of the glow is emphasized, so is the heterogeneity of the individuals brought together in this space. The ventriloquist and dummy entertain a group of glum children, and the golem’s mother negotiates with an employee while the golem waits stiffly. This space allows disparate narratives to flow over each other in a realm drained of the mystical energy associated with golems and goat-human hybrids. In this space, heir lives remain disconnected even as they overlap.

I conceive of recurring characters as threads that could be sewn through certain images in the series. Some characters only occur in one or two images, leaving most of their lives open to speculation. The bald man with the bandaged head appears twice: once in the extreme foreground at the DMV and once mourning at the revival tent. Perhaps his son died in a wreck just after getting his license, or perhaps the father had to renew his license while mourning the loss of his son. Much as Brueghel charged the visual field with numerous threads of activity, I attempt to avoid the relegation of people or environment to inert background by suggesting that even figures with marginal parts in this exhibition possess layered, emotionally charged lives.

Inspired by Bruegel’s richly layered scenes, I strive to create a world that rewards prolonged viewing, revealing complex aesthetic, narrative, and emotional interconnections within and between paintings. In the triptych *Learning to Walk*, I use typological grouping to foster connections between separate narratives without having figures occupy the same room or painting, using the commonality of a simple action to connect the images. The golem needed a midpoint between the early phase of her creation and her full functionality in *DMV*. I had previously intended to gloss over this transitional phase, but now found that it cemented the maternal bond between the human creator and the childlike creature. As a structural armature,
the triptych allowed a broader range of potential narratives to be spun from the paintings. The thematic rather than narrative connection between these three paintings carries a greater level of authorial remove than I have permitted myself in the past. The use of a loose situational premise to launch a branching typology gained another layer when each of its panels’ content was extended in adjacent paintings.

In addition to their several painted appearances, golem and her creator were depicted in a black-and-white video. During the opening reception of Discount Meat, a video of the golem learning to walk played on a large screen in the lobby. The six-minute loop contains one unbroken shot of a parking garage. A figure costumed in a shoddy approximation of the creature repeatedly shambles forward, falls, and is helped to her feet by her adoptive mother, again and again. The video’s provisional nature contrasted with the painted works, adding a contemporary counterpoint to the oils’ historical associations and expanding the exhibition’s formal vocabulary.

The image of the golem as a stumbling toddler in Learning to Walk began as an arbitrary confluence of the walking premise with loosely defined characters from another painting, but it redefined my conception of the relationship between the woman and the golem. Among the cast of characters, these two recur most frequently, as they occupy the grimy and the domestic, the real and the unreal, with equal ease. The golem is almost mythological, but her body is composed of contemporary garbage and industrial waste, and the reality of her constituent parts gives her a link to the mundane that other supernatural elements, such as the geometrical forms of my earlier work, and even the goat-human hybrid, have lacked. With her frame endlessly dripping and penetrated by/composed of pipes, hospital waste, and take-out containers, she is the grotesque body taken to its logical conclusion. Even with the visual absurdity inherent in a
garbage creature, their mother-child relationship contains some of the most sentimental moments in the series. Their narrative grew out of a short story I wrote about a woman who builds a homunculus out of garbage and breathes life into its balloon lungs. In this story, she teaches the creature the rudiments of her office job and sends her to work in her stead. She returns from a vacation to find herself locked out of her apartment, which has been usurped by the more efficient worker and filled with garbage, and the two have a violent confrontation.

This narrative bears mention as an example of the way excisions can fundamentally alter the course of the narrative elements in my work. In this case, I opted not to portray the relationship as one of mutual exploitation, partially because it fell too cleanly within established tropes—the doppelgänger usurping the original’s life, the monstrous-looking creature with a volatile temper—and partially because I had become fond of the creature. The short story contained a brief segment about the woman teaching the golem to type. I did not end up adapting that image into a painting, but the idea of the golem learning to walk grew from its premise. This maternal connection between them felt worthy of exploration as an optimistic element in a world that is populated with so many dispirited or aggressive characters. I aim to continue to expand my emotional range into positive, life-affirming territory, though I am wary of the easy, comfortable closure that often accompanies such imagery. In this case, the golem’s bizarre appearance tempers the sentimentality of the narrative with an emphatic reminder of the body as ephemeral material, as generator of waste, and as a locus of discontinuity and rupture.

6 CONCLUSION

Where this series began as an exploration of human physicality through corporeal metaphors and layered activity, my focus has shifted toward the emotional atmosphere of the
various works, expanding outward from the exhaustion, fear, and absurdist farce whose
depictions I gravitate toward. The open spaces in pieces, such as the expanse of empty
swimming pool on the left of Learning to Walk: Physical Therapy, have begun to feel
increasingly important as formal counterpoints to the density of bodies and objects in other areas
(such as the kitchen in Feeding the Cats), and as breathing room. The quiet areas have a latent
energy that heightens the knots of narrative activity by contrast. When depicted in a landscape
format with a great deal of uninterrupted space, the work’s lack of definition permits it to hover
more freely between potentialities.

The golem, the plastic hoses, and other imagery recurred in different environments from
one painting to another, spreading strands of narrative and symbolic connection between and
within images. In a vein of work that relies so heavily on presence—physicality of bodies,
specificity of environments, and plurality of unfolding events—one crucial element in the work
is the absence left open to be filled by viewers. This open interpretive space resides between the
images more than it exists within any one, extending the profusion of depicted figures and space
with a potentially endless web of unexplored connections.
Figure 1 Feeding the Cats.
2017. Oil on canvas, 72in x 48in.
Figure 2 Home.
2017. Oil on canvas, 30in x 40in.
Figure 3  Bruegel, Pieter. The Dutch Proverbs.  
1559. Oil on panel, 46in x 64in. Gemäldegalerie, Berlin.
Figure 4 Eisenman, Nicole. *The Triumph of Poverty.*
Figure 5  Sickness.
2015. Charcoal on paper, 24in x 36in.
Figure 6. *Kitchen Table, Trap Hill.*
2014. Oil on panel, 48in x 96in.
Figure 7 Rauch, Neo. Der Laden.
2005. Oil on canvas, 82 5/8in x 118 1/8in.
Figure 8 Hancock, Trenton Doyle. Dissension and Descension.
2008. Mixed media on canvas, 96 1/8in. x 96in.
Figure 9 A Crowded Yard.
2015. Oil on panel, 24in x 36in.
Figure 10 Benton, Thomas Hart. Achelous and Hercules.
1947. Tempera and oil on canvas mounted on plywood, 62 7/8in. x 264 1/8in.
Figure 11 Sleepers.
2017. Oil on canvas, 72in x 48in.
Figure 12  *Wet Food.*
2017. Oil on canvas, 30in x 40in.
Figure 13  Faith Healer at the Buffet.
2017. Oil on canvas, 30in x 40in.
Figure 14  Learning to Walk: Physical Therapy, Dead Teenager at Tent Revival, Golem and Lifeguard.
2017. Oil on canvas, 48in x 72in, 48in x 48in, 48in x 48in.
Figure 15  DMV.
2017. Oil on canvas, 48in x 72in.
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