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NOT DIRECTLY EVIDENT

by

JAMES THOMAS KENNEDY

Under the Direction of Joseph Peragine

ABSTRACT

This thesis paper gives the reader the opportunity to glimpse the dramatic artistic changes that took place in my work. It will provide insights into my development as an artist and my experiences in graduate school. I will share how the process of making art became my main interest and how art changed me spiritually, mentally, physically, and personally.

INDEX WORDS: James, Kennedy, Art, Drawing, Painting, Video, Conceptual, Spirituality, Process, Seeing, Test

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JAMES THOMAS KENNEDY

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2008

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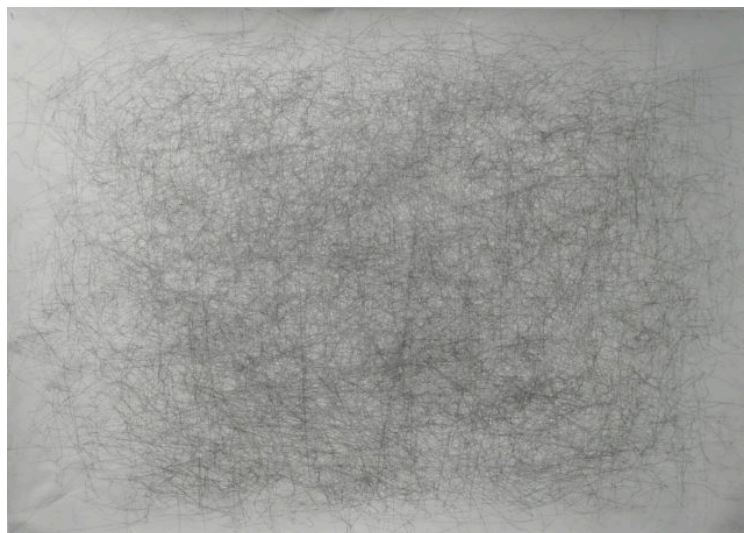
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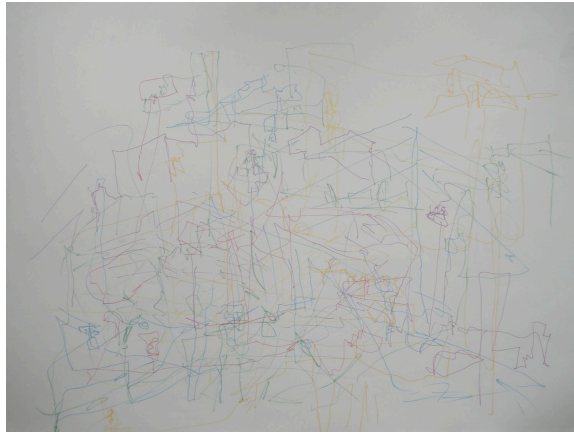
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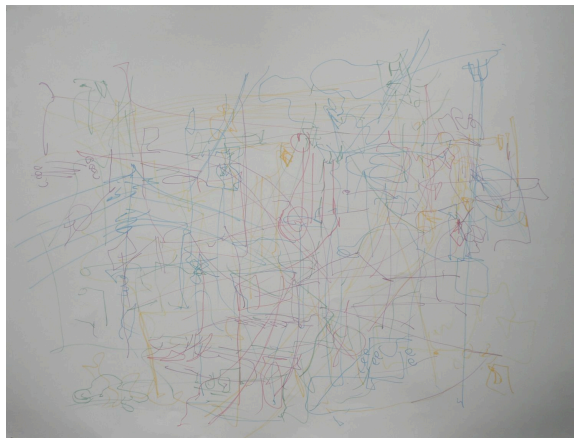
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INTRODUCTION

I used to draw doodles in school instead of taking notes. I was good at making visually pleasing pieces and I could draw objects realistically. My parents hung them up on the fridge for all to see. I went to college and was introduced to all sorts of art that expanded my vision including Abstract Expressionism, Dada, Post-impressionism, Minimalism, Surrealism, Modernism and Conceptual art. My art started to change and soon I began to stand out in my studio classes. I was selected to participate in the student shows; I won awards and felt excited when I saw people looking at my pieces and finding my work interesting. I thought that this was what being an artist was all about: making pieces and letting people decide if it was interesting enough to hang in their house or give to someone as a present. My eyes were opened too far and I could only see the big picture. I left school, traveled, drew, painted and sold some of my art. I was satisfied with myself as an artist and applied to graduate school not to become a better artist, but to get a masters degree so I could get a teaching job in art. I was not prepared for the change that was to take place in myself as an artist. It started with a breakdown.

BREAKDOWN

I started graduate school and made art no differently than I had before. I made pretty art for the first semester and I got by. Then a simple question triggered my artistic breakdown. I was in a critique where someone asked me, “What can you add to the art world that is new?” At that point, I had been making abstract paintings and drawings that resembled the work of the Abstract Expressionists like Willem de Kooning, Arshile Gorky, and Jackson Pollock. I enjoyed the freedom that abstraction offered. An example of this style is “Super Fantastic” (Image 1) which I completed in my first year at graduate school. Now it occurred to me: this style of art had

already been seen and copied over and over. I was in my comfort zone and did not see the problem with this; I didn't ask myself if I was making visually thought-provoking art. My ego was blinding my way forward. I thought that my way of working was something entirely new because the work was mine and that made it exclusive. I could have defended this point and gotten nowhere, but I decided to keep asking myself "Is this new?" Many artists struggle with this difficult question and I realized in the course of my own struggle that I did not have to make art that had never been seen before, but I needed to look at myself and make art that I had never done before. So the question became "Is this new for me?"

I was introduced to a project where I had to listen to a drawing being made and try to reproduce the sounds with my own marks. The drawing was separated into 40 equal squares forming a grid and my only tool was a pencil. This project was groundbreaking for me. I had never used the organizational aspect of a grid before and I had also been using many mediums at once. The new restrictions introduced by this project were more freeing than having no restrictions at all because they made me focus on my actions while I made marks. Before, I did not focus on how I made marks because my focus was already on the last step. I was excited about how the piece, "Sound Drawing I" (Image 2), turned out visually, but I was also happy because to me it seemed that there was more to the piece than before. I had become conscious of the steps that I went through in order to construct this piece of art. By channeling my focus into the process, I could blind myself from the end piece and by limiting myself to the rules of the project, my possibilities actually expanded. The final result was not preconceived, rather it was the result of the process. From that point on I decided to start focusing on the process.

PROCESS

Yet, I was still concerned about the final piece and wanted it to be aesthetically pleasing, but it was not my only concern. In the piece “Sound Drawing II” (Image 3), I took the rules and sounds of “Sound Drawing I”, but expanded these rules to a larger scale and added mediums including graphite, charcoal, and chalk. I wanted to re-create my experience, but make a more complex final piece. I slowly started to accept the idea that the plan and process were just as important as the final piece and that if the ideas and rules were stimulating, then the final piece usually formed into something visually exciting. Brion Gysin describes this idea in the book, *Brion Gysin: Tuning Into the Multimedia Age*, when he states: “And so the whole point of it...is the idea that you just put the material into a certain situation and give it a push, and then the thing makes itself.” In “Meet in the Middle” (Image 4) this principle is apparent. I made the rules: (1.) Use 7 panels (2.) Add a medium on every panel and add one medium every panel moving from 1 to 4 after using the mediums on the panel before. (3.) Take away the same medium that I added as I went back to one medium in the seventh panel. The rules were limited, but the idea was to show the viewer the steps I went through in order to reach the final piece. “Meet in the Middle” demonstrates the additive and subtractive process artists go through in order to reach the point where the piece is finished. As I worked, it became more significant to me that the procedure be seen and understood. I wanted the viewer to experience it.

A baseball card was given to me and I was told to make a piece of art from it. In “Vance Aaron Law” (Image 5) I was not interested in how the final piece was going to look. I was only interested in making the rules, following them and concentrating on the process. The rules were: (1). Use 56 cards to draw on because he was born in 1956 (2.) Make 921 marks on each card because there were 921 letters and numbers on the back of the baseball card (3.) Catch the marks

that went off the cards onto sheets of paper. “Vance Aaron Law” explores setting me in motion and letting the rules guide me until the piece was finished. This piece affected me in a different way than any other piece. When I was making the marks and counting them, I became unaware of my surroundings and was solely focused on counting and mark making. I had completely abandoned trying to see the end piece and a level of consciousness that I had never embraced before was being used and recognized. It felt like my conscious mind was letting go and allowing myself to experience an enhanced sense of spirituality.

SPIRITUALITY

My religious background was one of overwhelming beliefs. I was born and raised Catholic. I attended a Catholic school from 4th grade to 12th grade. The Catholic Church and its beliefs were imposed on me with such intensity and overpowering force that I rejected it completely. I found in making art a new way to better myself spiritually. I wanted to show people that there were other options than organized religion to enhance themselves and others around them. This breakthrough was a key moment in my life as an artist and a human being. I started researching different artists and how they explored spirituality and the art-making process. I had already been introduced to Jackson Pollock’s work, but now I looked past the initial visual seduction and I examined more closely his purpose for making art. The Navajo Indians were a major influence on Pollock and he made his strongest work under that influence. He treated painting as a ritual to heal himself as the Navajos treated sand painting to heal others. The artist was the healer or shaman not the patient. The patient was actually in the painting, sitting in the middle. The shaman was suppose to rid the illness, mental or physical, from the patient by making paintings out of sand and then destroying the sand painting once the illness

was transferred from the person to the sand. This shows that the Navajo were not interested in the final piece as a visual piece of art, but more in the way to rid the person of the illness. The visual aspects of the sand painting came from the healer's mind. There is no preplanning of the images and the images can be changed if the healing powers are not working. In sand painting, the images were not predestined. The importance of the art was the act of making it to heal.

This idea that art could heal excited me, but I wanted to set up projects that would also give me the chance to enhance myself spiritually. To do this, I needed to push myself in new ways, to cause myself discomfort. It challenged me to look deeper and become highly aware of the process. I soon noticed the process was leading to new aesthetic breakthroughs. The work I was producing was challenging me spiritually, mentally and physically.

MENTAL/PHYSICAL

“Drawings from Andy 1-9, #9” (Image 6) stands out to me because of this unification of brain, body, idea, and result. I made the rules: (1). Pick a movie I enjoyed visually. (2.) Draw what I see on the video without looking at the canvas. (3.) First drawing is 10 minutes, second is 20 minutes and so on until the last drawing is 90 minutes or the whole movie. This totaled about eight hours of straight drawing. I wanted to push my brain by having to focus on images for 8 straight hours and I wanted to push my body by drawing what I saw continually for each time period. My projects became more multifaceted in order to push my own boundaries. The rules did not become more complicated, but more demanding. In “Drawings from Andy 1-9, #9”, you can see how much visual information I could comprehend and transfer onto the canvas in 90 minutes. As the time increased the images would become less recognizable until the drawing was only texture. It was a meditation process in which I set up a test for myself. My goal was

complete concentration on the actual process, my body's movements and the attempt to translate the images seen into the images drawn. This project forced me into an uncomfortable place physically, but afterwards I felt spiritually enhanced and now became smarter and stronger. Artist Tom Friedman was a main influence at this time. His art pieces not only push the envelope of what is considered art, but he pushes his own physical limits by making them. In the book, *Tom Friedman*, the artist speaks about his piece "Everything" and says, "As the velocity that information is presented at increases, one's ability to process that information shuts down, and just the texture of the information is perceived." Following this idea, Friedman combines a unique mental vision with a physically draining piece. One such instance of this philosophy is that he actually wrote all the words in the English language on the piece of paper.

With these new projects I found a way to grow mentally and physically at the same time, but these projects still seemed irrelevant to connecting my beliefs and ideas with my art pieces. It felt like after the process was completed and I looked at the pieces, I felt a distance between me and my own work. I set a new goal to create a stronger personal connection before I even started making the piece.

PERSONAL

In "There" (Image 7) and "Back" (Image 8) I made my own video of my bike ride to and from school. The rules were: (1.) Make a video of my bike ride (2.) Draw while solely looking at the video (3.) Each time I make a turn switch color (4.) Draw half the video on one piece of paper and the ride back on another. These rules were based on those from "Drawings from Andy", but this time I tweaked them because I took what I learned and made these drawings on a more personal level. Before, I made rules just to make them with no personal connection to my

life. I realized that if I made projects with limits and rules that related to my life and what I was interested in outside of numbers that I could reach my audience on a truer, more personal level. I had more of a connection with this project because it was situated in something I do all the time for specific reasons. Riding a bike is important to me because it is eco-friendly, good exercise, saves money, and reduces stress. This project let me focus on objects that usually I would have ignored and share this with the audience. I took this insight into seeing out into my everyday life.

SEEING

I became more aware of visually interesting things that I had often passed by. It felt like I was seeing better than 20/20 vision because I could still see everything clearly, but the details were enlarged. Not only was I seeing better, but I was thinking clearer, more aware of the possibilities that would expand my art. In the piece “Burying Beethoven” (Image 9), I had covered up a drawing with white house paint and when I returned to paint on it I discovered that while the paint dried, it had cracked. As I took in the complete sight of the cracks I realized that I had seen this hundreds of times before, but with a different mindset. I had to let people see this pattern to show them the beauty in this simple procedure. So I traced each crack with a black pen and thus highlighted it for everyone to see. It is about seeing everyday events in a unique way and relaying this vision to others. My work is about seeing even when what you are looking at is not directly evident.

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