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PARABLES

by

ERIN DIXON

Under the Direction of Joe Peragine

ABSTRACT

This is a thesis about my most recent paintings. This work represents a quest for a real understanding of what painting means to me, as well as an exploration of fictional narrative and allegory which is derived from my life experience. Yet despite all the associations I have with these paintings, even with the most auto-biographical ones, they are meant to be open-ended. It is not necessary to know anything about me upon viewing them. Parables fictitiously illustrate a moral principle, and this work celebrates what I have learned in life and school.

INDEX WORDS: Erin Dixon, Parables, thesis, paintings, allegory

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by

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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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2008

PARABLES

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I.

Reading, listening to, and telling stories has always been as natural and necessary as breathing. The paintings to be included in my thesis are a group of works constantly evolving in terms of meaning and perspective. The body of work represents a quest for a real understanding of what painting means to me, as well as an exploration of fictional narrative and allegory which is derived from my life experience. I have drawn freely from many influences, from childhood to higher education, allowing whatever traces remain to manifest itself freely upon my work. These storytellers and artists are my teachers; my paintings are filled with gratitude.

Once I spoke the language of the flowers,
 Once I understood each word the caterpillar said,
 Once I smiled in secret at the gossip of the starlings,
 And shared a conversation with the housefly
 in my bed.
 Once I heard and answered all the questions
 of the crickets,
 And joined the crying of each falling dying
 flake of snow,
 Once I spoke the language of the flowers. . . .
 How did it go?
 How did it go?
 -Shel Silverstein, "Forgotten Language"¹

A painting cannot be all the things I want all at once. This is a new paradigm for me. These works represent a transitional phase and shift in the purpose of my painting techniques. Originally, the brushstrokes were meant to be expressive and tell their own story. As my work became less literal and more allegorical, the process had to evolve so my true intent was not obscured; it took a long time to realize that my beloved impasto was most effective as punctuation, not as full sentences.

¹ Shel Silverstein, *Where the Sidewalk Ends*. 1st ed., (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 149

II.

This realization freed me.

I did not need to begin all of my paintings with a swim in the murky collective unconscious. I could start with a single memory, still unsubdued, after several years, a trip from Seattle to Mississippi in five days in a white 1978 Ford F-250 truck with a broken gas gauge, traveling with my best friend, who had to leave Seattle and its temptations, who I would miss terribly later on, who, suffering alcohol withdrawal, was awful company on what should have been a grand adventure through Oregon, California, Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, and finally Mississippi. I left him at a shack on a bayou in a town called Marks, and flew back to Seattle, an unthinkable week after I left.

This memory could then be distilled into an image that talks about aggression, fear, love, boredom, wandering minds, silence, migration, irritation, beauty, ugliness, transcendence, and friendship. It is a way to understand these things that happened.

III

I need air. I walk every day to gather and digest thoughts; I consider the paintings in this show as footsteps through a metaphorical land--sometimes running, sometimes tip-toeing, and sometimes stopping to take a breath and digress. It is a meandering tour, originating in a vague dreamland, muddling through dissonant voices and sounds. There are many discoveries along the way: some are practical in nature, like how to apply the paint in certain ways, while some are more intangible and difficult to

put into words, like what makes one narrative richer than another and what is “effortless.” Scenery can vary wildly, even within a short distance, and strange sights can be seen from the corner of my eye....These are romantic ideas about walking.

Yet walking is extremely methodical, as is painting. Richard Long, in a 2000 artist statement, says “Walking itself has a cultural history, from Pilgrims to the wandering Japanese poets, the English Romantics and contemporary long-distance walkers.”² Long was the missing link I had been looking for to connect art-making with walking. In the days of working in production, painting one decorative painting/knick knack after another, the way to get through the day was to have a sort of Zen attitude about the process. This was a learned practice, as in school and as a kid I lacked discipline and patience. It was around twelve years ago that I began walking in earnest for the sake of walking. This was not new, but now I understood the importance of it; moving through air while being connected to the ground, dispersing the anxieties that gather in my chest, taking note of changes in my surroundings since yesterday.

I satisfy my requirement for perambulation by acknowledging foot travel as part of my practice; it follows an ancient way of life back to the hunter/gatherers. It is evident in my narrative painting at times through metaphor, and at times as an account of ideas worked out during these jaunts. Richard Long records his walks through various straightforward yet poetic means; sticks picked up along the way, simple descriptive phrases (“...Dendles waste/into a low sun/glistening frost/fox tracks/between the granite....) photographs of certain points during his journey.³ Matsuo Basho (1644-

² Online

³ Craig-Martin, 791

1694,) the Japanese poet, recorded his poetic wanderings in haiku and haibun⁴ (“For the person who has the spirit, everything he sees becomes a flower, and everything he imagines turns into a moon.”)⁵

Looking at the English poet and artist (and walker) William Blake’s engravings and watercolors, there are many parallels between his images and mine. The first painting I started for this exhibition, *Three Sisters*, as well as the second, *Land of Nod*, has a biblical/mythological aesthetic to it which is reminiscent of Blake more than James Ensor, the painter I was studying at the time that I was working on these pieces. Sometimes, when embarking on a journey, getting out of the door is the most difficult thing to do. One visiting art critic asked me if I believed this painting. I think my answer was “oh.” Maybe it is the scale of the thing. Blake was mourning the encroachment of a “man-made materialist and rational civilization”⁶ onto an unspoiled and innocent natural world, and his enmity about the evils of organized religion and politics were deeply heartfelt.

...his ten thousands of thunders,
Rang’d in gloom’d array, stretch out across
The dread world; & the rolling of wheels,
As of swelling seas, sound in his clouds,
In his hills of stor’d snows, in his mountain
Of hail & ice; voices of terror
Are heard, like thunders of autumn
When the cloud blazes over the harvests. –William Blake⁷

It’s a theme that becomes more and more relevant with every generation since. The act of being an artist or craftsperson is a political act in and of itself, as a hand-made thing becomes very scarce in our contemporary world.

⁴ a condensed, lyrical prose (Heyd, 295)

⁵ Heyd, 295

⁶ O’Malley, 190

⁷ O’Malley, 195

And so *Three Sisters* has a little Blake, like his *Whirlwind of Lovers* and his illuminations from *The Inferno*, and some of Goya's demons and Ensor's faces, and also some of me.

The next painting, a diptych entitled the aforementioned *Land of Nod*, was a continuation of this grandiose, mystical train of thought. Again, folklore, biblical themes, Greek myths, all figure in. This painting is open to interpretation, very Jungian...a journey, one that I came to see as being to and across the River Styx. As I painted and painted, the landscape changed, from field, to forest, to underground. I don't know if characters are all different, or if one moves through the two canvases. The colors are bright yet still kind of hellish.

Molting is a much smaller, more thoughtful painting, with a calmer palette. The main figure, in a vague landscape, is shedding vestiges of past ideas, past entrapments, former identities. In this and the previous two paintings discussed, the final narrative did not materialize until well into the execution of the work. To look at the works in progress would be to see ten different paintings at least. The knowledge gleaned from those pieces helped me start the next ones with a destination in mind, a story to tell, and a more personal agenda.

Now is when ground is traversed in earnest, a steady pace has been achieved; initial anxieties have dissipated; the purpose seems much clearer. Three more paintings were started, *The Investigation*, *Elder*, and *Not Who They Thought They Were*. The idea of depicting a book was the impetus in *The Investigation*. A book could serve as a painting within a painting and is an allusion to story telling. A grid of faces is seen in many contexts- in records of all kinds, from high school yearbooks to America's most

wanted, missing children, prisoners. The hellish faces from *Three Sisters* now smile for the camera.⁸ The main character is distorted in a mantis-like way, in reference to the Surrealists' preoccupation with the insect- and also mine- or really, with insects in general. The praying mantis, more than most insects I can think of, seems to have a kind of awareness, a kind of deliberation.

Elder is an extension of an idea from the first painting completed for this exhibition, *The Conspirators*. In *The Conspirators*, a cluster of faces is meant to convey a conversation of dubious subject matter. It is a noisy painting. The main characters are quite malevolent and foolish, though they believe they are clever. *Elder* is more subliminal, and the cluster of faces begin to become something else. I had my grandfather in mind for the figure who is talking,⁹ though I was thinking of children's book authors as well, especially Maurice Sendak and his *Where the Wild Things Are*, and Roald Dahl, who often had stories within stories in books like *The BFG*, *Danny the Champion of the World*, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. An older (usually male) character was always telling the younger protagonist fanciful yet slightly disturbing tales. "...Nobody *ever* went in and nobody *ever* came out. The only thing anyone could ever see were shadows dancing in front of the lighted windows...mighty strange..." -Grandpa Joe, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*¹⁰

Not Who They Thought They Were starts to get away from the cluster of faces. This story is about a self-scrutiny and raises questions: What does the female character

⁸ The faces are also a direct reference to the drawings of a much-loved friend and drunk, William Elgin, whom I worked with in Seattle. While we were at the wallpaper factory he would draw these hilarious characters and scenes strictly for our own amusement.

⁹ My grandfather died a little over a year ago. He was a difficult man, especially in his last years when he suffered from dementia. Yet in his day he really could tell a story, and I wanted to remember him as I did when I was a kid--in the summer, with no shirt on, skinny arms and a round brown belly, telling me how it was.

¹⁰ Roald Dahl, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. (Alfred A. Knopf: New York, 1964), 22

bring out in this man? What effect does he have on her? Who is left behind and forgotten? This analogy also extends to painting and narrative as well. The thick, expressionistic impasto is replaced with more cautious dry brushed layers. Who is the protagonist? The male figure has bird-like creatures emerging from his chest; these are based on mummified birds I was given and began painting for a time. Sometimes the little birds are sad, foreboding, or noxious...or they are transcendent. They signify a change in mood and subject matter from Van Gogh-like colorful landscapes and portraits to something murkier and less assured.

The last set of paintings includes *Unwelcome Bounty*, *Highway 666*, and several untitled works on wood panel. *Unwelcome Bounty* and *Highway 666* include modes of transportation in their narrative, yet one is more about drifting, while the other is about covering vast distances. This impulse to involve migration in my work must surely be linked to the fact that I am literally moving on in my life. The clusters of faces and bodies are still present but with each painting they become less and less apparent. *Unwelcome Bounty* is a cautionary tale, I believe, being prone to drifting at times. The allegorical possibilities of the sea, the rowboats, and fishing are unending.¹¹

Highway 666 is based on a real event in my life--a trip from Seattle to Mississippi, mentioned earlier in this paper. Driving down Interstate 10, I was parallel in some areas to Route 66 and could see it from the highway, and that was when I learned there was an actual Route 666, which was appropriate. It was an experience that I had wanted to be a turning point in my life, and it really wasn't; it was just a lousy trip.

¹¹ The title makes me think of *Mutiny on the Bounty*, which I have not read or seen in any of its multitude of incarnations, though I have read about the real events on which it is based.

Reality sets in. At this point in the walk my knees hurt and my feet ache and have blisters, and I'm hungry and thirsty. As the last painting on canvas started for this show, *Highway 666* has a mystical world in the rearview mirror and the "real" one just beyond the horizon.

IV

Despite the associations I have with all these paintings, even with the most autobiographical ones, they are meant to be open-ended. It is not necessary to know anything about me upon viewing them. Parables fictitiously illustrate a moral principle, and this work celebrates what I have learned in life and school. It is wonderful to take brush and paint to a surface and make a kind of sense of the world around me and of events that occurred (which at the time seemed to have no purpose or benefit.)

Let us leave this place where the smoke blows black
 And the dark street winds and bends.
 Past the pits where the asphalt flowers grow
 We shall walk with a walk that is measured and slow,
 And watch where the chalk-white arrows go
 To the place where the sidewalk ends. —Shel Silverstein, "Where the
 Sidewalk Ends"

Home at last.

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Figure 1.



Three Sisters, 2007
Erin Dixon
Oil on Canvas
64"x48"

Figure 2.



Land of Nod, 2007
Erin Dixon
Oil on Canvas
36"x72"

Figure 3.



Molting, 2007
Erin Dixon
Oil on Canvas
30"x24"

Figure 4.

*The Investigation*, 2007-8

Erin Dixon
Oil on Canvas
22"x40"

Figure 5.



Elder, 2007
Erin Dixon
Oil on Canvas
16"x20"

Figure 6.



Not Who They Thought They Were, 2007-8
Erin Dixon
Oil on Canvas
40"x28"

Figure 7.



The Conspirators, 2007
Erin Dixon
Oil on Canvas
20"x20"

Figure 8.



Unwelcome Bounty, 2008
Erin Dixon
Oil on Canvas
36"x48"

Figure 9.



Highway 666, 2008
Erin Dixon
Oil on Canvas
36"x36"