unfictional

Curtis Ames

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UNFICTIONAL

by

CURTIS AMES

Under the Direction of Joseph Peragine

ABSTRACT

*Unfictional* describes the philosophical underpinnings of specific strategies and processes that led to the thesis exhibition of the same name. The defense provided examines the contemporary notion of the ideal, acknowledges its impossibility, and describes how the use of obstruction as a procedural and curatorial strategy functions to produce failed attempts at its attainment, deferring satisfaction and evoking the sense that everything is complete. The forms, constructed from both found traditional and nontraditional materials, which exist in various states of completion, will be analyzed thoroughly in order to demonstrate how the unfinished, provisional nature of the works included in the exhibition ultimately functions as commentary on the loss, the longing, and most of all the doubt, associated with the modern conception of the ideal.

INDEX WORDS: Ideal, Progress, Nostalgia, Binary, Doubt, Obstruction, Materials, Process
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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

2014
UNFICTIONAL

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May 2014
DEDICATION

To Candice Marie Greathouse, my wife and collaborator.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you everyone who encouraged me, challenged me, and helped me push my work. I would like to thank my thesis committee members specifically. Thank you, Susan Richmond, Joe Peragine, and Craig Drennen for all your comments, criticisms, and insights.
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1 PROLOGUE

Virtuosity is not a weapon, it is a shield; mimesis is not a mirror, it is a shroud. For much of art history, artists have been celebrated for their originality, honored for their ability to transform or manipulate the materials of their choosing, hailed for their perceived ability to master their craft, lauded for the imposition of their will. However, over the years, I have adjusted my studio practices to suit my ever-shifting conceptual needs. I have explored many genres and methods of making. I have succeeded at times, but, mostly, I have failed (and not for a lack of trying). And, like all good failures, my own missteps provided me with ample opportunity for reflection, for patient self-criticality. In the end, these creative experiments led me to realize that although I believe in honesty, I never put much faith in the possibility of Truth. As such, I can no longer justify spending hours upon hours, days upon days, weeks upon weeks, months upon months, constantly engaging in the tedium of covering up mistake after mistake until I achieve resolution after one final definitive sweep of the brush. Instead, I prefer not to strive toward the impossibility of resolution. Instead, I choose doubt as my medium of choice to investigate resolution’s antithesis. Instead, I court failure, I dismiss the entire notion of the masterpiece, and ultimately, I examine the ways in which simple gestures can express more about the mediated experience that is the human condition than the props for the timid spirit - the outdated, ostentatious, and ineffectual displays of technical prowess.

2 INTRODUCTION

It’s always possible, and therefore, always tempting to locate influences. My studio practice and its supporting framework are vulnerable to historicization. I could link the reasoning behind my current method of making to the philosophies behind any and every art movement, but I prefer not to cite such similarities. In my mind, doing so leaves the door open for one to infer a
broad generalization with respect to the cause and effect relationship between past and present. And I, for one, have never found that implication to be all that useful or necessary when discussing art or art ‘movements.’

And so, while others before me have surely arrived at the same conclusions, and while there is always room for comparison, the impetuses behind the studio practices that are to be discussed in this thesis paper were arrived at independently. Therefore, the creative decisions I have made deserve to be analyzed thoroughly. They are not to be dismissed and swept under the proverbial rug. Instead, I prefer to contextualize the formal and conceptual decisions I have made throughout my thesis year as ongoing, open-ended processes; a series of experiments whose results are best viewed as artifacts of the entire creative experience.

Stemming from an ongoing obsession with the pursuit of perfection, my artistic practice seeks to uncover the underlying structure of the ideal and how this structure reveals itself both abstractly and concretely. However, in order make sense of my preferred approach to making art, it is important to establish some of basic philosophical premises that serve as the overarching theoretical impetus of my creative practice. To accomplish this, I will rely on the work of Svetlana Boym, a scholar specializing in the history of nostalgia and its relationship to the formation of the idyllic edifice, and Thomas McEvilley, the renowned critic and author of Sculpture in the Age of Doubt. Through the work of Boym, I will highlight important distinctions between the nostalgic operations of restoration and reflection. By referencing the work of McEvilley, I intend to form an argument as to how the nostalgic ideal is referenced when it manifests itself both physically (through the limited format of representation) and evocatively (through negative presentation and open-ended scenarios of irresolution). Ultimately, through the work of these two scholars I will fully explicate how my faithless relationship with the ideal led to a dramatic
shift in the philosophical framework of my creative practice, and thus formed the basis of my underlying schema of interference.

As such, this paper will begin by examining the philosophical framework behind the creation and installation of works included in thesis exhibition *unfictional*. I will contextualize my overall approach to making art and provide a rationale for my current preferred methodology, one that examines the contemporary notion of the ideal, acknowledges the impossibility of its attainment, and utilizes obstruction as a procedural and curatorial strategy that ultimately, functions to evoke a sense of deferred satisfaction that comes from failed attempts at its attainment.

3 ON NOSTALGIA

In *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym’s goal is to reexamine and reevaluate the way nostalgia functions. Nostalgia, a sentimental desire for the irrecoverable stasis of another time and place, was first coined in 1688 by Swiss physician Johannes Hofer to describe the melancholic mood endemic to various groups of Europeans affected by the forces of displacement. From its emergence as a medical term in the 17th century to its co-option by philosophers, poets, artists, and other creative types in the most recent age of modernity, to its current status as a global cultural condition, Boym highlights the ways in which the function of nostalgia has changed throughout its history.

According to her, there are two similar yet distinct forms of nostalgia: restorative, attributed to *nóstos* (the return home), and reflective, attributed to *algia* (longing). These two types of nostalgia, while always at play within any given cultural age, are rarely, if ever, experienced at the same time. Their frames of reference may overlap but ultimately they each tell very different stories.
3.1 The Promise of Progress and the Trauma of Failure

“Success and progress endure as a condition to strive for, even though there is little faith in either.” – Lisa Le Feuvre

As defined by Boym, the term “restoration (from re-staure – re-establishment) signifies a return to the original stasis.” With this in mind, nostalgia is often affiliated with an idealized past, a former there and a former then, and the certainty of its attainment. Although, on the surface, restorative nostalgia proposes to rebuild what has been lost by moving forward to and through the past, under the surface, this type of nostalgia can also reference the lost potential of another kind of ideal, one that speaks of another place and time, one that speaks of another there and then, and one that speaks of future’s promise of progress. By not limiting her interpretation of restorative nostalgic operations to those associated with an idealized past, Boym asserts that regardless of how it manifests itself, be it through its affiliation with truth and tradition or with progress and promises, all conceptions of the ideal function nostalgically in the restorative sense of the word. They all seek the impenetrability of equilibrium as they reject the constant that is change.

While on one end of the nostalgic spectrum, restorative nostalgia is tied to the certainty of the ideal, reflective nostalgia, on the other end, is affiliated with the longing associated with the failure of its attainment. Reflective nostalgia conceives of and recognizes the notion of the ideal, and at times, even yearns for it; however, at its core there rests doubt in its possibility. Its main concern is in the present perfect and the longing associated with its lost potential. Reflective nostalgics believe in new beginnings but acknowledge that they are found not by moving forward

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1 Lisa Le Feuvre, editor, Failure (London: White Chapel Gallery, 2010), 12.
through the past but rather by resisting “the pressure of external efficiency” through a series of lateral maneuvers. Through these maneuvers, they acknowledge change as the only constant and the futility of backwards progress.³

Ultimately, restorative nostalgics believe that their project is about truth, whereas reflective nostalgics dwell on the feelings of longing and loss associated with the imperfect processes of attempts at its attainment.⁴ Reflective nostalgia functions to offer “a critique of both the modern fascination with newness and the no less modern reinvention of tradition.”⁵ In other words, reflective nostalgia provides a framework with which not only to examine the structure of the contemporary notion of the ideal but also to comment on the obstructions that facilitate its restorative impossibility. They acknowledge the “irrevocability of the past and human finitude,” and instead, propose that the notion of “re-flection suggests new flexibility, not on the reestablishment of stasis.”⁶

The distinctions Boym makes between restorative nostalgia and reflective nostalgia are quite significant, especially in the way I see my own work functioning. As such, in the section that follows, I turn my attention to the work of Thomas McEvilley in order to illustrate the ways in which traditional pictorial representation ultimately, like restorative nostalgia, operates through the conception of another time and another place, another there and another then.

³ Boym, Nostalgia, 21.
⁴ Ibid., 41.
⁵ Ibid., xvii.
⁶ Ibid., 49
THE PRESENT POTENTIALITY OF MATERIALITY

“When the conventions of representation are no longer fit for purpose failure can open new possibilities.” – Lisa Le Feuvre

In order to contextualize my recent transition from a practice based on traditional pictorial representation (Fig. 4.1) to one based on the materiality and objecthood, I will now reference the work of Thomas McEvilley, focusing specifically on portions of his book, Sculpture in the Age of Doubt. In Sculpture in the Age of Doubt, Thomas McEvilley addresses the distinctions between the ways in which representational painting and sculpture operate to create illusion. Likening the traditional pictorial representation of painting to a window, or veduta, that ultimately creates a vision that is inherently inaccessible, he suggests that this artistic format obfuscates the here and the now of the present. Although it is clearly an illusion, through the suspension of disbelief, McEvilley asserts that the relationship between the viewer and the picture plane is one that aspires to transport the viewer through the “window in the wall” to the there and then of another time and place. It is in this way that I suggest that the pictorial space of representational painting ultimately functions nostalgically in the restorative sense. The window that is the picture plane alludes to another there and another then and and, no matter how remote it may be, is suggestive of the possibility of its attainment.

Sculptural representation and its affiliated illusionistic implications, on the other hand, function quite differently than those associated to painting. Whereas paint as a medium is “automatically at a remove from the everyday reality and involved in a trajectory beyond it,” sculptural materials, even when used to create an illusionistic presence, occupy physical space in such a

7 Le Feuvre, Failure, 13.
way that the viewer is forced to negotiate its physical presence. In other words, the medium of sculpture is inherently foregrounded by its material facture and physicality.

While both mediums use materials to achieve illusionistic semblance, sculpture’s concrete materiality more firmly situates in the realm of the real, in the realm of the here and the now. As such, the materiality of sculpture serves to separate it from the there and the then of restorative nostalgic operations of representational painting. This distance is something that has recently come to the forefront of my studio practice. Suggestive of the ideal and its attainment, traditional pictorial representation, particularly that of the medium of painting, speaks of the promise of another there and then, to which I can no longer subscribe. And so, having finally rid myself of the need to cover up, I have chosen to abandon traditional pictorial representation in favor of a practice based on the contemporaneity of materiality, i.e., the here and the now, of a nonrepresentational object-based studio practice.

5 ON UNFICTIONAL

“The apparent laxity of rigor expresses only a greater rigor, to which one had to respond in the first place.” – Georges Bataille

Within the work of unfictional, there is an inherent struggle against the pressures of productivity. Either through the failure to perform restorative acts, or through the creation of scenarios that evoke such, the whole thing is meant to fail, or at least be evocative of failure, on some level. Through the difference afforded by engaging in ambivalent actions, such as doing/undoing, making/unmaking, breaking/fixing, fixing/breaking, my creative process is ult-

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9 Ibid., 41.
mately a balancing act, suggestive of performativity, as I straddle these binaries so that I may better express the open-ended temporality of the ideal.

5.1 In Studio

My current studio practice includes both materials associated traditional methods of making, such as wood, metal, canvas, and paint, and those affiliated with the common and the everyday. I gravitate towards the fragmentary salvage of the world around me – scraps of wood, metal, and fabric, bits of wire and broken mirrors, pencil shavings and crumpled paper, rubber bands and rolls of tape, balloons, balls, and bubble wrap, etc. Although there are some instances in which an object’s functional history is relevant to my practice, material fodder is chosen primarily for its physicality, its structural integrity (or lack thereof), its manipulative potentialities and limitations, and ultimately, its facture.

Within my studio practice, there are two basic approaches to making art. The first approach deals specifically with the structural integrity of a given material. Based on a material’s potentialities and limitations, a rule is drawn and an action is performed; however, as I am counter to the notion of the masterpiece and, therefore, reluctant to bring any one work to a virtuous conclusion, some aspect of completion is delayed or obstructed. In this way, I invite chance into the process so that the objects and materials I manipulate in my studio yield unexpected outcomes.

With this approach, it is the gesture, or the process, that serves as the manifestation of the restorative nostalgic act and not the object. What I am left with, the artifact of the gesture, is a subtle allusion to the performative act, its failure, and, through its negative presentation, a referent to that which has been lost, offered up for nostalgic reflection.
While this aspect of the creative process is evidenced at varying degrees throughout my practice, *Unbent Aluminum* (Fig. 5.1) best exemplifies my affinity for the open-endedness of ambiguity and unexpected outcomes. *Unbent Aluminum* references the ideal and its impossibility through the negative presentation of the restorative act that led to its creation. Made from a long, thin strip of reclaimed metal that has been bent then unbent, *Unbent Aluminum* signifies a failed attempt to restore it to its original shape.

While the second approach to my studio practice is similar to the first in that it also exploits the potentialities and limitations of a given material, it differs in that I create scenarios, evocative of ambiguity and irresolution, through a combination of materials rather than through the manipulation of just one. Examples of this aspect of my studio process can be found in *Tilted Wood/Taut Rubber* (Fig. 5.2) and *MirrorMirror* (Fig. 5.22).

*Tilted Wood/Taut Rubber* is a contrived scenario that functions as a gesture of protest or refusal. Persistently remaining still against all odds so that there is never any real sense of closure, a seven-foot length of reclaimed wood hangs in an ambiguous state of stasis tenuously propped up by an irregularly shaped scrap of baby blue latex that has been stapled to the wall. Refusing to be either up or down, it is in a perpetual state of positional ambivalence.

Ultimately functioning to insinuate the impossibility of the restorative act of looking, *MirrorMirror* can be seen as yet another scenario evocative of irresolution. Comprised of two 11” x 11” mirrors (one is cracked while the other is whole), each affixed to 11” x 11” x ¾” plywood backing and hung in a corner so that their edges are flush. In this configuration, the mirrors create a situation that provides multiple views yet also refuses one complete vision. While fulfilling their functional promise of reflective fidelity, the mirrors show either too much or not enough. The whole of oneself is seen yet unseen; resolution is always kept at a distance and out of view.
In the end, these objects and scenarios function ambiguously in order to contain experiences I see inhabiting the transitory spaces between the interpersonal and intrapersonal, discovery and loss, abandonment and retrieval, refusal and resignation, obfuscation and revelation, truth and fiction, evoking the ‘almost there but not quite.’

5.2 In Situ

“Certain ideas and motifs are kept open, always available to be pushed in new directions, reconfigured for new situation.”11

The transition from the setting of the studio (Fig. 5.4) to that of the gallery provided a unique challenge not previously encountered with my former primarily two-dimensional practice. Differences in scale and layout between the two spaces compelled me to reevaluate the roles the pieces would play, both individually and collectively. This led to a number of curatorial decisions I feel ultimately enhanced specific motifs of isolation and configuration while also expanding opportunities for obstruction.

The first, and perhaps most significant, curatorial decision made was the avoidance of labels. With the exception of the sign outside the gallery, which simply read, ‘unfictional’ (Fig. 5.5), none of the works included in the exhibition were given titles. In my opinion, labels function with specificity in such a way that isolates the work, directs the viewer, and limits interpretive possibilities. By opting against the use of labels within the context of the gallery space, I allow for the exhibition to function as a unified, immersive, and exploratory event rather than a collection of related yet separate works. In this way, each individual piece is afforded a greater degree of contextual expansion within the whole of the exhibition. This sentiment directly refer-

11 Ibid., 7.
ences my aforementioned strategic interest in creating situations and scenarios that allow for open-endedness and unexpected outcomes.

While some of the objects, especially those restricted to the right-angled parts of rooms, such as MirrorMirror, Unbent Aluminum, and Neutralized Corner (Fig. 5.6), function in much the same way as they did while in my studio, other objects’ roles, however, changed significantly once they became part of the gallery space. For example, the \( \frac{1}{2}'' \times 48'' \) strip of green chalkboard laying approximately five feet away from and parallel to the threshold of the gallery entrance (Fig. 5.7). This object, which could once be found propped up against the back wall of my studio, fulfills a different role now that it exists in the gallery setting.

Upon first entering the gallery, the viewer is confronted by this object and, by virtue of its location, it demands a decision be made – left, right, or over. However, while this spatial intervention, the first of several ambulatory impediments found throughout the gallery, may seem ironic and insignificant, it serves a very important purpose. This punctuated space functions to give pause, to create a moment of hesitation before the decisive act of ‘left, right, or over.’ This pause provides the viewer with the opportunity to quickly scan the room and map the space before choosing which path to take. From this vantage point, there are three distinct groupings of objects. Some of these objects function to isolate and reinforce various expressions of failed attempts at recoverability while others offer to immerse the viewer in a variety of obstructive scenarios.

Directly beyond the obstructive strip is large partition wall with spotlights focused on two distinct yet related works of art titled Broken Band and flattened Balls (Fig. 5.8). Broken Band is a large, heavy-gauge rubber band that has been severed and nailed to the wall. The severed ends of the rubber band, once slack are now stretched taut, almost to the point of breaking. The nails, exploiting the band’s inherent elasticity, prohibit its return to a relaxed state of equilibrium. This
creates a sense of tension and uncertainty as the band is forced to remain in a position of obstructed stasis.

Resting on the floor to the right of Broken Band is –flated Balls. –flated Balls is comprised of an assortment of abandoned athletic balls emptied of half their air and placed within a large, yellow rectangular wire basket. Serving to enhance the overall complexity of the piece, one ball, a weathered blue-gray tetherball, rests outside the confines of the cage, its rope entangled in the wire of the basket. Ultimately operating to evoke a sense of longing and loss, –flated Balls takes advantage of the functional history of its material components; they are rendered inoperable, in the traditional sense of the word, and their full potential as functional objects is left unrealized.

Another way in which potentialities are left unrealized within the context of the gallery is the way in which specific objects are used to obstruct the space. Making effective use of the space with respect to the underlying strategy of interference, works such as Abandoned Column (Fig. 5.9) and Tangled Light/Warped Plane (Fig. 5.10) are situated on either side of the partition wall as spatial impediments. As such, they function to both delineate the area between the front and back of the gallery space, and to hinder free passage to the beyond the plane of the partition wall.

On either side of these obstructions are groupings of objects that also raise questions as to how an exhibition space functions based on the arrangement of the objects within. Traditional placement of many of the objects is eschewed in favor of unorthodox obstructive compositional strategies.

To the left of the partition wall (Fig. 5.11), objects, such as Broken Window (Fig. 5.12) and Approximated Union (Fig. 5.13), lean against the wall for support, while others, such as Crumpled Paper (Fig. 5.14) and Stacked Wood (Fig. 5.15), seem to be placed on the floor as an
afterthought. The nontraditional placement of these works of art create a sense of doubt as to how one should navigate the space in order to properly view the objects offered up for contemplation.

*Tempered Temperance* (Fig. 5.16), in particular, evokes uncertainty as to the appropriate way in which to experience its content, a narrative scene of a figure attempting to draw a perfectly straight line over and over again until the pressure of achieving this goal proves too much and the writing implement breaks. While this narrative serves to illustrate the futility of sustained, yet ultimately failed, attempts at the pursuit of perfection, by placing the monitor and DVD player on the floor and angled closely to the wall, *Tempered Temperance* functions sculpturally as an impedimentary object. Upon approaching this sculptural scenario, the viewer has a choice. He or she must either watch the scene unfold from an inverted position, or circumambulate the monitor in order contemplate its content from a traditional viewing position. By presenting it in this manner, its materiality is foregrounded while its pictorial filmic content is relegated to a lower position of importance.

Another video piece that operates much like *Tempered Temperance* in the manner in which it impedes the viewer on multiple levels and with varying degrees of complexity is *Study of a Film About Everything*. Located to the right of the partition wall, *Study of a Film About Everything* is projected onto a large reclaimed screen that visually dominates the surrounding grouping of objects and sculptural ephemera (Fig. 5.17). The projector screen functions as a sculptural object, occupying space and demanding the viewer negotiate that space in a specific way. Not only disrupting the free and open ambulatory flow of the space, depending on how a viewer has negotiated the space occupied by the screen, it also functions as a visual obstruction, removing from view several of the traditionally hung objects that have been placed in its proximity. Closely angled toward the wall, its position in space creates yet another visual impediment. However,
rather than hindering one’s view of other objects, it struggles to realize its own functional potential as a surface upon which filmic images are typically projected.

Once in a position to finally bear witness to the projected event, however, the viewer is left wanting. Instead of offering filmic imagery, the viewer is presented with a trembling and unfocused recording of the screen itself (Fig. 5.18). Ultimately, by displaying the projector screen in the gallery in this manner, by superimposing a looped projection of a recording of the thing on the thing itself, I am suggesting a complex new temporality, reanimating and further mediating the object, and collapsing past, present, and future tense into one visual event. This representation of the object is so poignant, not because of the pang of recognition, but through the realization of difference. The wavering of the projected image, approaching yet never achieving complete alignment with its indexical referent, suggests the notion that while reconciliation is all but impossible, it is still worthy of pursuit, thereby reinforcing the overall theme of the exhibition.

6 CONCLUSIONS

“If a [work of art] seems lousy, perhaps with a poorly constructed support and amateurish paint handling, look again.”12 – Sharon L. Butler

Searching for unexpected outcomes rather than handsome results, I have shifted my practice in a direction that requires a different sensibility and a different way of looking. I operate within my own brand of straddling between the binaries in a series of failed attempts to locate a system suitable enough to reconcile dysfunctional worldviews. This seeking out is integral to my

understanding of the evaluative process of the contemporary notion of the ideal – a notion that is always fluid, never solid, and therefore, never truly had.

While subtly engaging in the exploitation of material and spatial facture, the work of *unfictional* serves to foreground the manner in which simple acts of obstruction prohibit the actualization of the successful restorative act. In this way, *unfictional* operates reflectively, focusing on the ways in which failure necessarily evokes the sense of loss and longing, the notion that everything is incomplete, and the constant deferral of satisfaction. Ultimately functioning to reveal the illusory nature of any idyllic edifice, what I present to the audience are artifacts of the creative process that, rather than celebrate the fragmented, the unfinished, and the incomplete, function as icons of the lost wholeness they imply.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Figure 4.1 *The Raft of Last Piscininas*, 2012, oil on canvas, 48” x 60”.
Figure 5.1 *Unbent Aluminum*, 2013, aluminum, 115” x 1 ½” x ¾”. 
Figure 5.2 *Tilted Wood/Taut Rubber*, 2014, wood, latex, staples, dimensions variable.
Figure 5.3 *MirrorMirror*, 2014, mirrored glass, wood, 11” x 22”.
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Figure 5.18 Study for a Film About Everything, 2013, video (0:4:11), projector, reclaimed projector screen, dimensions variable.