

RICHTER, MICAH BRANCH, M.F.A. Little Pieces: Quotidian and Quixotic. (2013)
Directed by Mariam Stephan. 12pp.

I paint to learn something visually about the world, and to experience life more deeply and thoughtfully. Using acrylic paints, I paint scenes from my everyday life, exploring the humble and the overlooked. I leave my brushstrokes unblended and visible to alternately hide and reveal the subjects of my pictures. These marks leave a record of my visual perception, to which they are directly linked through my hand.

LITTLE PIECES: QUOTIDIAN AND QUIXOTIC

by

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A Thesis Submitted to
the Faculty at the Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

Greensboro
2013

Approved by

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Date of Final Oral Examination

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LITTLE PIECES: QUOTIDIAN AND QUIXOTIC

I began drawing as a child, from memory and imagination. One day my mother suggested I try drawing a specific tree instead of an invented tree, and this seemed a very odd but novel idea to me. From there I began copying things I adored: comics, video game characters, etc. I enjoyed the way I could create a likeness of something else with my own hands, however imperfect, and that the likeness belonged to me in some way, even if the subject was unobtainable.

This appropriation of things, characters, and objects remained a large part of what I did until I began taking art classes at Appalachian State University. I was introduced to art history in survey courses that tread through huge chunks of history in a condensed form. I began to gain some knowledge of artists of the past, recognize famous works, and choose my favorite artists. I switched from the acrylic paints taught at ASU to the oils of the art I admired. I decided it was time for me to put aside silly juvenile impulses and become a “serious artist.” I also came to the landscape around this time, partly out of my awe of Impressionist and Post-Impressionist landscape painting, from my childhood immersion in the landscape of western North Carolina, and from the extreme challenge of interpreting so much natural information on a 2-D picture plane. I obtained my BFA with a show of landscapes, and went straight back into the field after graduation in an unbroken line of work. I was sure I had something autobiographical to say in these landscapes; they were pictures of a place I knew and loved.

After a few years passed, I felt uncertain of how to proceed. I started countless paintings that were never finished, not knowing what I was doing or where I wanted to go. This was when I decided to apply for graduate school, which I hoped could give me direction and make me a better painter. I tried to continue my landscape painting in the same way I had been working the past few years, but my method was habitual rather than thoughtful. I struggled in the new environment of Greensboro, trying to find things that reminded me of home. Unsatisfied, I approached my paintings almost solely from a technical viewpoint, and rambled from one stylistic idiom to the next with little actual progress. By only changing the most superficial aspects of the work, I hit the same brick wall over and over. I tried making small changes: painting street scenes, working larger, working smaller, but by the time of summer 2012, I felt desperately in need of some alone time to sort things out for myself.

The end of my first year of graduate school was also marked by the diagnosis of a repetitive strain injury, which made working through the summer almost impossible. My hands were stiff and painful, and therapy made it worse-causing me weeks of intense burning pain. It became difficult to even brush my teeth or use silverware. By August I found a hand specialist in Pennsylvania whose aggressive treatments gave me relief, but the summer did not become the productive creative time I had anticipated. With only a handful of conventional rural landscapes to show for my efforts, I failed my Candidacy Review at the beginning of September.

At first I had no idea how to continue. For a week or so afterwards, I just went back to some unfinished canvases, and halfheartedly tried to complete them. It became

obvious something drastic would have to happen, as I was on the edge of a precipice. I could lose everything: the use of my hands, my degree...what would I be able to do now? What was left to motivate me to even get up in the morning? With the help of Professor Mariam Stephan, I scrapped everything in my studio-everything I thought I knew about what kind of artist I was, and in a sense started over.

I've always had a faith in humble things, so simplifying my practice to its most basic essentials felt like a progressive change. I worked in black and white ink washes at first, which freed me from color, solvents, easel, canvas, and all of the other accoutrements I had become reliant on. The ink moved effortlessly across the paper and saved my hands from the difficulty of mixing and applying thick oil paints. It was also a medium with which I had very little prior experience or facility. I had to accept the accidents and missteps that could not be corrected.

Subject matter was the most challenging obstacle I needed to confront, as I was no longer able to explain what I was painting. I decided to throw out all notions of a proper subject for serious painting. Instead I drew first thing I saw: a charcoal grill. On small square rectangles of paper, I drew the grill repeatedly from a similar vantage point, exhausting every perceptual or stylistic approach that came to mind. Out of desperation, I moved the grill around, opened it, looked at the reflections in its lid. This activity felt like the first time I had genuinely looked at anything in a long time. I walked through my neighborhood, sketching strange things that caught my eye: an abandoned grocery cart, heavy machinery, a unique patch of foliage. By the time I reached for paints again, I wanted to feel like I could paint anything. Using acrylic paint on a variety of supports, I

explored the nooks and crannies of everyday spaces that I had never before taken the time to investigate.

My current body of work has naturally grown out of the ideas of that fertile investigation. The ten paintings comprising my thesis work are all quite small, ranging from 7” to 11” square. I enjoy the intimacy of small paintings, and the way they directly correspond to the intimacy of the scenes they depict. I often employ a square format, because a square is by its very nature a purely abstract form, an ideal form. A square can easily be broken into quadrants and further into a grid to relate compositional parts to one another. The square has unique compositional challenges, requiring that I focus my attention more securely on just those things that interest me. To include any more is far too much. As a result I have become much more aware of my visual interests and their compositional possibilities. I am drawn to visual patterning, complex jumbles of information, and small bursts of saturated color. I have been learning how to directly relate the format to the subject, carefully determining the size and shape of the rectangle specific to each painting.

The switch from oil paints to has been an important change. I had begun using oils near the end of my undergraduate career to be more like painters in the museums, to make serious art. Switching back to acrylics felt like dropping a great historical burden. Acrylic paints look toy-like to me, and I engage with them in a playful way, without the rigid seriousness that I had been so encumbered by. Working on un-stretched canvas or watercolor paper also helps me sidestep traditional expectations of what paintings should be. Because of the fast drying time, I paint in a different way. I can no longer consistently

work back into wet paint, so I cannot worry over blending harsh transitions or varying the edges of objects. Each color note has to be mixed separately, and form can only emerge through adjacent color relationships. Working in this way, I move from one small piece of information to the next until I have covered all of the subject's terrain with my eyes. The method directly relates my hand and eye, and translates, piecemeal, the nature of visual perception.

The most recent paintings have become shallower in perceived depth, and often the subject is parallel to the picture plane. Many include objects with images printed on them: photographs, potholders, greeting cards, etc. I am interested in these subjects for many reasons. First, they simply provide me with more material to work from, more diverse forms and odd color combinations. I am only beginning to realize that this kind of variety is extremely important to my paintings, and one of the reasons I have to constantly search for subject matter. I have gotten stuck in a quagmire of familiarity in the past, using the same colors and compositional strategies too often. I now look for unique situations of forms and colors that I would never think of putting next to one another. I also search for variety in value key and temperature, making paintings that differ from one another in overall value and hue.

These new subjects also create clear visual situations of excitement and rest, opening up opportunities for variation of the brushstroke. Brushstrokes require a faith that more literal translations of the world do not. A visible stroke can fragment and distort the world, alternately hiding and revealing information. My medium is paint; so on the canvas, the world must be paint. If everything is made of this same material, why make

distinctions between the things we assume to be true about real objects? My knowledge of the texture or weight of an object has little to do with my purely visual understanding of it.

Where the surfaces I paint are parallel to the picture plane, they become a direct analog to the surface of the painting, but they defy being read as *trompe l'oeil* works. I am not interested in the materiality of the things represented, but rather their real-world appearance as affected by current lighting conditions, atmosphere, and reflected color. I am fascinated by the way a picture or photograph contains its own small world with its own set of rules, but simultaneously exists in our larger world, and so is subject to the conditions of this one as well. I paint my subjects the way they appear to me from a given distance and hope to learn something new about the world, beyond the common knowledge I have from physical interaction. I want to know what the knowledge of a dedicated observer IS. I attempt to look at familiar things in a new way in the hope of finding something that I never knew was there.

In my search, I borrow openly from many painters both contemporary and historical. Paul Cezanne is important to me because of his curiosity concerning his perception of the world, and the outstanding rigor of his work. Poring over Cezanne's work has forever altered the way I see and think visually about the world. He can pull forms out of a formless void, or alternately pulverize what we thought was a solid plane- with equal vigor and plausibility. Vilhelm Hammershoi's hermetic representations of small familiar places impress upon me the ability of art to transform the quotidian and mundane into something transcendent and new, without becoming surreal. Hammershoi's

brushstroke, infinite in its ability to capture the nuances of light and subtle temperature changes, has directly influenced my work, encouraging me to look without preconception. Often ignoring the directional planes of a form or an object's location in space, his strokes beat out a relentless autonomous rhythm. American landscape painter George Inness is an artist I love for his moody and technically diverse depictions of New England, but I also continue to find direct inspiration in his spiritual beliefs. His faith in Emmanuel Swedenborg's proposed vision of the afterlife led him to see all material things as composed of the same ethereal matter. In his late paintings, this manifested in gauzy ephemeral landscapes that make little distinction between things hard, soft, near, or distant. All are broken down by the haze of his brushy atmospheres. Everything is mere paint. Contemporary artist Catherine Murphy is also an important touchstone for me. Her use of the square encouraged my experimentation with the format, and her powerful command of deep formal skill has set an impressive benchmark for representational painting. Her understanding of the specificity of scale and format show me how much further I have yet to go. The uniqueness of her vision and her devotion to her interests has helped me begin to formulate my own interests and my relationship to them. Ann Gale is another contemporary painting giant to whom I feel greatly indebted. Her work is a kind of "research of seeing" that gives permanence to the thousands of brief sensations of light and color that define our vision. Her figures, posed but never static, have the quality of Cezanne's "gestating" still lives, vibrating with life and more thoroughly observed than I would have thought possible. She seems always to be actively searching for the strangeness and ridiculousness of the ordinary.

With these and many other important artists as guideposts, I continue to broaden my practice as well as more clearly define my purpose as a painter. I paint to liberate myself from the tyranny of time and “common sense” knowledge. By looking closer at the things around me, no matter how humble, I am continually surprised by what I find there, by what new ideas can spring up from even the most well-trodden ground. Painting gives me an excuse to do this kind of looking; it allows me to be more aware, to live more sensitively, to not take things for granted. I experience the world more deeply, and prolong moments of curiosity and joy with a paintbrush in my hand. By sharing the images that result from this experience, I hope I can give some sense of my journey to others.

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