

CONNECTIONS THROUGH NARRATIVE

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ABSTRACT

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The need for narrative is the foundation of my work. Throughout human history people are brought together by narrative. In a way, the human mind needs narrative like the body needs food or water. People gather for the shared need and love for food, so do people gather for film or theater as well as other forms of storytelling. We share our experiences with others when we get together or through social media posts. For many of us, information is easier to process and understand when it comes in the form of narrative. Narratives not only entertain us but also facilitate learning opportunities and personal development. Even when we sleep and dream, we involuntarily develop imagined scenarios, like the way we breath without thinking about it. I have constructed a narrative through model making and animation. The content of this narrative is an assemblage of elements collected from dreams and memory. The process of combining these elements is achieved through stream of consciousness producing surfaces and textures, movements of model protagonists and juxtaposition of images. Much of the material used to build the models is scrap material that I have collected, such as wood, paper, and foam. These models serve as sets for simple stop motion animations and are combined with digital animation, live action video, photographs, and original music to create a surreal narrative. The work explores how narrative contributes to our quality of life and why that is important.

INTRODUCTION

Narrative is a component of human existence that is as fundamental as eating and breathing and is the foundation of my work. We consume narratives from others through various sources such as literature, theater, music, cinema, and art. We also share our own narrative through conversation in both formal and informal contexts. For example, while participating in a job interview you may be asked to describe a difficult situation that you encountered and explain how you were able to overcome that predicament. Alternatively, during a trip to the store one may run into a friend or acquaintance and exchange details about what is new in each other's lives. Simple narratives can be an effective tool used to explain complex ideas in a manner that is more easily understood by a wide audience. In addition, sharing our narratives can provide an opportunity to take a glimpse at the lived experience of others. A story is simply what happened, but narrative refers to how a story is told. According to author John Hagel "stories are self-contained – they have a beginning, a middle and an end" and "narratives are open-ended" (Hagel) which provide an opportunity for the audience to become participants. Creating my own unique narrative from lived experiences and dreams are what my work has always been about. It is not my goal to tell my life story, only to share narratives inspired by my experiences and observations.

FROM STILL IMAGES TO ANIMATION

I have been drawn to creating still images since I was a child. Like many children, this began with crayons. I drew simple representations of the things I felt a connection to, such as family, and things I saw every day. I continued to do this, sporadically, into adulthood. One of the ways that I would occupy my down time while deployed in Afghanistan was by drawing. I had ordered a book on figure drawing which I would refer to in an attempt to create imaginative drawings. While deployed I was even asked to hand paint a sign which read “Cav Hill” and included an image of crossed sabers, the U.S. Army Cavalry insignia. The sign was placed at the top of the hilltop observation post that was used for area overwatch. Art making was a part of me all along without realizing it, but I had never received or even pursued any formal training. Looking back, I realize that I was in dire need of mentoring. Four years after leaving military service I enrolled at the University of North Carolina Wilmington and started my journey toward a career as an artist and began receiving the training that I needed.

My early influences were painters such as Arthur Dove, Emily Carr, Kay Sage, Edward Hopper, and Francis Bacon. I have always enjoyed the simplicity and abstract representation of nature in the work of Arthur Dove and Emily Carr. I have utilized compositional strategy from Edward Hopper. My painting *There and Back Again* (see fig. 1) was influenced by Hopper’s painting *Summertime*. Francis Bacon partly influenced the content of my painting *Have a Drink* (see fig. 2), as well as Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, Francisco Goya, and Peter Paul Rubens. My interest in Kay Sage began with my interest in surrealist paintings which resulted from my desire to incorporate dreams as part of the content in my paintings. All along I would use image compositing similar to my use of clip art as a child to make digital collages that serve as a type of sketch. These digital sketches would become the basis for my narrative paintings.



Fig. 1. Kyle Kelsey, *There and Back Again*, 2020, 24 x 48 inches, acrylic on wood.



Fig. 2. Kyle Kelsey, *Have a Drink*, 2020, 24 x 48 inches, acrylic on wood.

I began building models using found items like foam or scrap wood along with other materials and supplies. These models were originally intended as visual reference to enhance the visual aesthetic of my work by using a real-world reference. One of the artists I looked to for this was Amy Bennet who constructs models that she uses to develop paintings. I realized these models could be used as sets for stop-motion animation and finally I knew what I was missing. My work needed motion to provoke more of an emotional response to my work and extend the time that viewers would engage with the work. My main influence in stop-motion animation is Australian animator, Adam Elliot. Everything included in Elliot's animations are created by hand, including backgrounds which are painted on canvas. Elliot uses narration as the main strategy to tell the stories of his clay characters and calls these animations "Clayography" (Frank). Elliot has said that his love for animation is related to his varied interests in art making which can brought together as animation. This was the catalyst that opened my eyes to the reality that I too could incorporate all my creative processes in a single art form.

CHILDREN AND NARRATIVE

According to an essay by Brian Sutton-Smith, published in *Narrative Psychology: The Storied Nature of Human Conduct*, “children can begin to tell stories themselves in about the third or fourth year of life when this is encouraged by their parents or teacher” (Sutton-Smith 69). The essay also includes examples of short stories created by children as little as two years old. While these stories are not complex by any means, they seem to demonstrate that imaginative thinking may be an instinctive part of human nature and can be cultivated from an early age. I think most children in modern societies live in a world of play which may have some connection to the ease at which children can make up stories on their own. Think back to when you were a child or seize an opportunity to watch a child at play. As a child plays through various toys and games the child invents their own narrative without struggle. Often these narratives are informed by the environment in which they live in, the people that are close to them, and the experiences they have had so far. If you give a child a box of crayons, they will create their own narrative imagery of the things they value, often their family, friends, and pets. As a child, I did something similar when my mother was forced to bring me to work with her. I would use a vacant computer in the office to occupy my time by using clip art to make composited imagery that I would print and share with people in the office. My memory of this has influenced the silliness and child-like elements of some of my work and continues today in my brainstorming process.

CONNECTIONS

Historically narrative seems to be a focal point of social engagement. This occurs in many ways. For centuries people would, and still do, attend theater performances and in modern society we have cinema. Narrative can also be found in the fine arts and, of course, literature. For any of these people can participate in clubs, whether in person or through internet forums, related to the mentioned disciplines that include story telling. Still there are casual interactions with our coworkers, friends, family, neighbors, and other community members. I once read a blog where military service members shared their own narratives about the most creative forms of punishment, they either witnessed or experienced during their time in service. I can say from personal experience that story telling is quite prevalent in military culture and recruits meet people from all walks of life so there is no shortage of engagement through personal narrative. People often become very close to people that they would never have had any interaction with outside of their service together. My own work includes imagery derived by my experiences as a member of the United States Army. Below is an image of a painting I created, titled *Keep up the Good Work* (see fig. 3), inspired by events that occurred while I was deployed in Afghanistan. In the image there is an outhouse that had caught fire by accident and two dogs that were rescued from a trash can while I was deployed in Afghanistan. The image depicts a somewhat typical day on the hilltop observation post that we fortified.



Fig. 3. Kyle Kelsey, *Keep up the Good Work*, 2020, 24 x 48 inches, acrylic on wood.

NEW EVIDENCE

As complex emotional creatures, we seem to understand intuitively that our stories can bring us other closer together. When we feel a connection to something, we know it is real because we can feel it even if we cannot prove it. However, there is now evidence to support the connection that we feel through story telling. Uri Hasson conducted a study at Princeton University which used neuroscience to measure brain patterns during story telling (Hasson). One person would recite a story while being recorded and having their brain scanned. Other participants would listen to this recording while also undergoing a brain scan. What Hasson found was that the same parts of the brain were being activated in similar ways for both the listeners and the storyteller. This test was conducted in both English and Russian. In one group, English speakers would hear a story in English. This group had brain scans like the reader. Another group of English speakers would hear the same story in Russian. This group had very different brain scans from the reader because they could not understand the language. What this showed was that the way a story is told, if it can be understood, can create a measurable connection between people. People who have never met before can share the same experience, in some way, through narrative. From this, one could suggest that any story communicated in any way that is not limited by spoken language may provoke similar connections across a wide range of unique individuals.

MY WORK NOW

I continue to use memories and dreams as parts which are assembled to construct narratives which become the foundation for short animations. The first step in my animation process is to select a setting and fabricate it. These sets start by gathering needed materials. Some of these materials are found or are left over from previous projects. Then I determine what materials are still needed to complete construction and collect those materials. This part of the process allows me the opportunity to use my background as a painter to make spontaneous decisions regarding the visual aesthetic of these sets. When I complete a painting, there is only a rough idea of what the finished work would be, and each mark applied to the canvas is a response to the previous mark. This approach is like navigating to a location that one has never been, without any established routes for getting there. It is uncharted territory. With a setting established, the next step is to create puppets which populate the scenes. These puppets are assembled with 3D printed parts, wire armature, heat shrink tubing, glue, and paint. The puppets are a minimalist design not intended to be any specific person. Though the content is sourced from my own experiences, my protagonist serves as a placeholder that could be anyone. This way the viewer may be able to insert themselves or someone they know into the scene. At this stage I develop a rough storyboard that serves as a starting point for the animated video. This rough storyboard does not provide all the necessary information to complete the work. Even with the pieces selected and a storyboard created there are still gaps that need to be filled with additional content to complete a narrative. Below is an example panel (see fig. 4) from the storyboard for *Misadventure* along with a screenshot from the completed animation (see fig. 5).



Fig. 4. Storyboard panel example from *Misadventure*, 2022



Fig. 5. Kyle Kelsey, *Misadventure*, 2022, variable size, mixed-media animation.

To complete the animation, I use a digital camera connected to a computer and software designed specifically for stop-motion animation. This streamlines the process and allows me to review individual images and full video clips, while shooting. Here I am again able to use the spontaneous, painterly approach that I spoke of previously. The storyboards illustrate key points in the narrative but leave out specifics. For example, in the opening scene of *Misadventure* the character is seen sitting on the floor and stands up. This is a relatively simple action and could be a bit boring. To add life to the scene I consider additional actions that can be included to add life to the protagonist. In this case, the character is seen looking at their hands and wiggling their fingers in a manner as if they are attempting to provoke a lucid dream. Lucid dreaming is when one is aware they are dreaming. One strategy to accomplishing this is what is known as a reality check. There are different ways to conduct a reality check, the example included in *Misadventure* is looking at one's hands (Love 90). Executing reality checks while awake can potentially instigate one to perform a reality check while dreaming, which may lead to awareness of the dream. Including this action in the animation process was not scripted and could be described as improvisation. This unscripted strategy is an attempt at developing a more human like feel within the narrative. After each clip has been shot, they are edited, and additional stock video and sound effects are added to complete the work. This is also completed spontaneously through experimentation and play.

CONCLUSION

The goal of my work is to establish connections with viewers. In my work I embrace play to create uncanny scenarios and imagery. As mentioned earlier, children seem to do this with little difficulty. As such, I have chosen to create narratives that contain a cartoon-like chain of events with various elements extracted from my own dreams and experiences. The result is intended to be silly and fun while still allowing opportunity to participate in more complex discussion. I think that sharing narratives, can offer others common ground. I believe this is important because it is not our differences that bring people together but the things we share in common.

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